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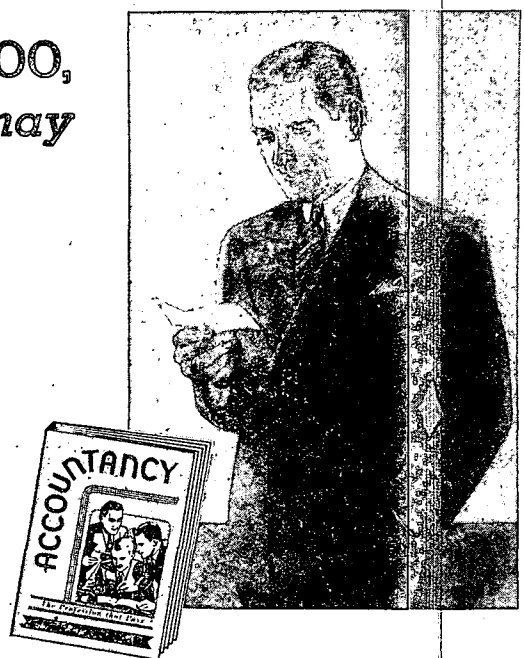

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This magazine is on sale every Wednesday

A RED STAR *Magazine*

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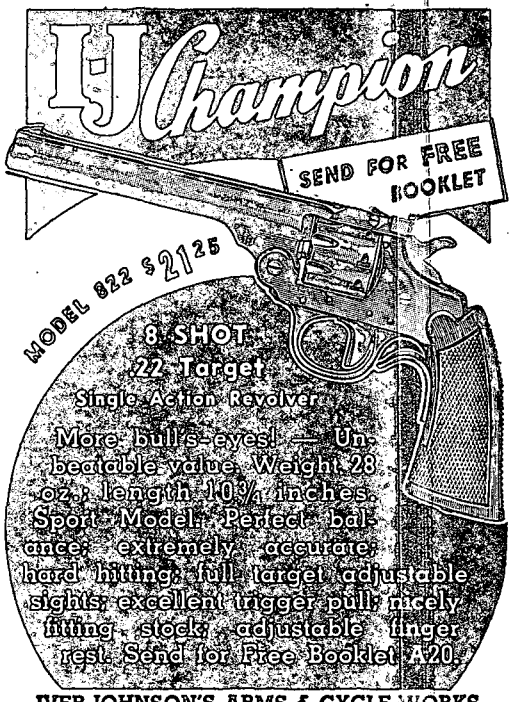

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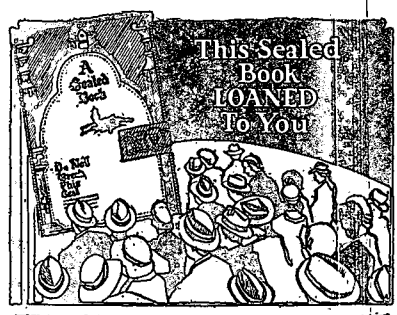

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First, he shot out the light; then confusion and gunfire became general

To Ride a Crooked Trail

By C. K. SHAW

Author of "No Guns Wanted," "Uneasy Guns," etc.

A cowpoke may find it easier sittin' in his own saddle and pullin' his own trigger, when wolves of the Oregon Trail open up on questions of mistaken identity

I

TOM HANNA couldn't look into Dave Cline's eyes as he bent over to make Dave easier on the saddle blanket. But Dave was dying and there was a pull in his eyes that cost Tom all his strength to resist; finally Tom had used up all his will power—he gave in and looked at Dave squarely.

"Passing off for another man is serious business, Dave," he mumbled. "I don't ride easy under false colors."

Both of them had about the same shade of light-colored hair; both were burned by wind and sun, and near the same age. Dave Cline replied with the dogged determination that makes even death pause while a disrupted house is set in order.

"We've rode some long trails together, shared good days and bad. I never had a cool head for thinking. Last night isn't the first time I've pulled you into a tight. I'm making my will now, with the sky and cactus and sand as my

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three witnesses. I'm willing you my fortune, *and my name*. A man has a right to will his name away, the same as any other earthly possession, hasn't he? I won't need a name where I'm going." A ghostly smile touched his lips as he finished. His eyes were coals smoldering in an ash-gray face.

Tom Hanna's restless fingers could find no more wrinkles to smooth from the saddle blanket. As he pulled his glance away and laid it in a line across the sand, his mouth tightened.

Last night they had ridden into an isolated camp and five men had asked them to share supper, and later, a card game. Tom had been looking after the horses when the gunplay flared up, but he had managed to get Dave into his saddle. The two men left alive at the fire had not been eager to come after them.

By dawn, Dave Cline had known he was dying. He made Tom read again the letter from his father's uncle.

Old Nelse Cline lived in a little Wyoming town on the great Oregon-California Trail. He had operated his trading post there when the first ruts were being ground into the long road. He had been there to serve the homeseekers on their trek to the Oregon Country; he had replenished the supplies of the stout-hearted Mormons; he had been there with a welcome for the weary forty-niners. Now another great gold rush was awakening the old trail. Idaho and Montana were giving up the riches of their mountains and creeks. Again a horde of men were cracking whips over the backs of weary horses, jabbing spurs to quivering flanks of mules that were dying on their feet, shoving two-wheeled carts across the 2,000 miles.

In his letter, Old Nelse Cline said in a year a fortune could be made at his post in Hassaway. He wanted his great-nephew to go partners with him. He was old and there was a need for young blood. He had never seen this nephew, but in his last years he longed for a young man of his own blood. He said all he had would be Dave's when his days were finished.

TOM HANNA and Dave Cline had been riding toward Wyoming when this bullet had cut Dave down. Now Dave was asking Tom to go on alone. "Are you listening to me, Tom?" he whispered.

Tom brought his gaze back to the gray face. "I'm listening. I'll go on, Dave. I'll tell the old man how you intended to make up to him for the way he helped your dad twenty years back. I'll tell him—"

"I'm not sending you that way," the other said doggedly. "Uncle Nelse and I are the last of the Clines. I want what is mine to go to you. The old man deserves a lift, Tom, but that ain't your job. He says the trail is flooded with cutthroats and robbers. It's going to be a fight. I'd like to know you was going to take over for him—if you shared in the profits the same as I would."

A stillness built up between them. The man on the blanket lay so motionless that Tom Hanna looked at him closely. Dave felt his friend's uneasiness and opened his eyes. The ghostly smile returned to his lips.

"I won't shuffle off 'til we get things settled, Tom," he said obstinately. "You'll be lonesome riding by yourself," he whispered. "You've wanted the two of us to settle down and grow up with a town, and I've always had a hunger for roving. Uncle Nelse is lucky I'm sending you, Tom, for you'll take root like I never would."

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Tom Hanna moistened his lips. "All right. I'll do what you want, Dave," he said. "I'll do my best."

Dave Cline loosened his stubborn hold on life. The ghostly smile came again to his lips, and this time it lingered. "I feel like I'm paying you some for the way you've always stuck. Like last night. Good luck, Tom."

Tom Hanna forced words through his stiff lips. "I'll take care of things, Dave."

Dave Crane heard and nodded faintly. Then he was gone.

Tom Hanna continued to sit in the shade of the three scrub cedars, looking across the baked miles. His father had been killed in a gun fight before Tom could remember. He had grown up somehow, never knowing a word of his early history.

Many nights he had laid sticks on a sage fire and tried to picture what life was like where a boy had a family. At sixteen, he had joined Dave Cline and his father in a gun fight that had finished Dave's father. The two boys had teamed up. That had been seven years ago. And now he and Dave had struck a fork in the trail.

II

TOM HANNA rode the long trail to Hassaway, Wyoming. As the days rolled away, he ceased to doubt the wisdom of his errand. Nelse Cline would welcome the prop of strong young shoulders. The pride of his own strain would not have to be uprooted. The old man began to take form before Tom's eyes. He had said "your Uncle Nelse" to Dave, now he thought of him as "Uncle Nelse." It helped when the miles of the trail grew long, and it was what Dave had wanted. It had been his last will.

Hassaway was a wide-streeted, noisy town beside the Oregon Trail. Freight wagons, light road-wagons and two-wheeled cars dug into the dust of its main thoroughfare. Buildings bulged with men who moved in and out of them with the almost maniac restlessness of the gold-seeker. Fragrant new pine was loaded on three wagons of a twelve-mule team that Tom Hanna passed. From a flashy-fronted building whined the strains of *The Days of Forty-Nine*. It was an hour before sundown, but the town was rousing to its night life. A new day had come to the old Oregon trail. The ox teams of the thirties and forties were too slow for this generation.

Tom rode toward a livery stable with wide wings, corrals and feeding yards. He put up both horses—his own black and Dave's sorrel. He had sold his saddle and now rode the one that had belonged to his friend. On the back of the cantle was burned the initials D.C.

Uneasiness dug into him. Fears that he had been able to throttle as he rode the quiet trail, returned. Suppose he met some man who knew him. He sighted a tall man in boots and stepped to a shadowed doorway. Then he saw it was not the foreman he had known in New Mexico. Fear had made his eyes play the trick, for there was little real resemblance.

Would it always be that way? Would he be watching doors and listening to steps behind him? Would his hand always be restless unless it rested on a gun? His mouth was dry as cotton as he moved up the wide street. Loud words brought him alert. He saw he was before a new building with the lettering, *Shelt Faber General Mercantile,* on its front. Two men came through the doorway.

"Shelt Faber ain't robbin' *me!*" one

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shouted. "I'm unloadin' that kerosene off my wagon." He strode to a light wagon drawn up to a hitching post.

The other man had sleeves rolled back over thick arms, and Tom spotted him for the clerk. He boomed an answer. "Faber can't haul goods from Kansas City and sell at eastern prices. We had to raise on the kerosene."

"You wouldn'ta raised if Nelse Cline hadn'ta lost three wagons of freight over a mountain side. You wouldn't raise if Nelse had any kerosene for sale. I'll burn a wick in mutton taller the rest of my life 'fore I'll let Shelt Faber rob me!"

He rolled two five-gallon cans of kerosene from his wagon and climbed to the seat. He drove away, leaving the clerk swearing at the two cans in the street.

Another man came to the door and his squirrely eyes darted after the wagon. Smooth, stubby fingers clenched the gold nuggets of a chain that spread across his vest. He spoke quietly. "Spraying talk around like that is dangerous."

The clerk blustered. "I come near bustin' his head open for him, Mr. Faber."

Faber waved for the cans to be taken from the street. "No use skinning your knuckles on these mossbacks that settled hereabouts when the trail was new. It's the gold-rush trade we want. Still, talk like that hurts us."

The clerk paused to chuckle as he carried the cans into the store. "Kerosene ain't goin' to be all old Nelse Cline is short of. He lost another wagon train —robbed."

"Robbed!" Shelt Faber's quiet voice lifted. "Where did you pick up a story like that?"

"Word come in an hour ago. Reckon some tradin' post was runnin' shy of supplies—with this rush on—so they Injuned old Nelse's load." He laughed. "The old man didn't need them supplies no more'n he needed his right arm."

Shelt Faber spun about, his eyes following the big clerk as though he could learn still more from an inspection of the broad back. His lips were compressed, his eyes thoughtful.

Tom Hanna moved down the street, turning over the scene in his mind. Faber was not the type of man Tom would have figured to be disturbed by a competitior's loss, yet he had not gloated with his clerk over Nelse Cline's bad luck.

"Maybe he was worried for fear the thieves would strike at a load of his own freight," Tom mused. "It's close to that, for I never saw a pair of squirrel eyes yet could cry for anybody but themselves."

Tom forgot his nervousness. His step lightened and quickened. He was anxious to meet Nelse Cline and tell him he had come to help. "He hasn't jumped his prices just because he has a chance to bleed his trade," Tom thought. "He'll probably be a lot like Dave."

THE Cline Trading Post was a low building of stone and huge logs. It was built to resist the winter gales from the Rockies, and to shut away the parching heat of summer. The sign above its door was a wide pine board, washed bone white by the passing years. The black paint of the lettering had resisted sun and wind and rot so that now the name was embossed on the aged wood. Across an alley were two big warehouses.

Tom Hanna stepped inside and looked about. Neat, severely plain shelves lined the walls. Canned goods had one section, bolts of cloth another.

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There were saddles hanging on the wall with bridles dangling from their horns. There were sets of harness, and a great pile of collars and pads. There were shirts, overalls, and hats. Buckets hung in clusters, shovels and picks stood in piles. Beyond the large room was another room and through the doorway Tom could see piles of boxes and rows of barrels and sacks.

A boy come from this room with a broom in his hand. "Want to buy somethin'?"

"I want to see Nelse Cline."

"He's across the alley at the warehouse. If you want to buy somethin'—"

Tom shook his head, smiling. "Nice post, this."

The boy cut short a swing of the broom. "None better. We ain't got a glass counter like Shelt Faber has, but you can sell jest as much 'cross a board counter."

Tom walked toward the back door that led to the alley. "More, at times," he said over his shoulder. He heard voices from the nearer warehouse and crossed to its open door. He made no effort to lighten his steps, but it was not his way to make much noise when he walked. The words a woman was speaking came to him.

"You haven't lost any time. You could have been decent and waited until you had proved yourself."

A man's voice snapped back. "I didn't expect you'd be pleased—not hardly." The laugh that followed was tantalizing. "I don't blame you a lot. It upset your well-loaded applecart."

"I could hate you for that!" said the woman. "I am trying very hard not to."

Tom kept moving forward. He stepped through the doorway and faced the pair. A slender young woman lifted dark, serious eyes to his. Her oval face was tense with strain. The man was thick of shoulders and hips, and his white, wiry eyebrows shelved cold blue eyes.

"Do you make a habit of listening to folks' conversation?" he asked Tom Hanna.

Tom saw the man's smoldering anger could easily be fanned to fire. Tom did not want a scene. The fear in the girl's eyes was not a thing of the moment; it was something that long hours had planted. Something that grew steadily within her.

"I want to see Nelse Cline," Tom said.

The squat man continued to block his path. "Talk to me, I'm in charge."

The words jabbed the girl to action. She stepped toward a corner of the warehouse where piles of boxes reached the rafters. "I'll call Uncle Nelse," she said, very quietly. Her hands were flat and tense against her plain dark skirt.

An old man came in answer to her summons. His shoulders sagged and a worried frown knotted his wrinkled forehead. He was tapping some sheets of paper and shaking his head.

"You better check this list, Dorris. There should be more sugar and beans."

She took the paper. "Here's a man to see you, Uncle Nelse."

Nelse Cline turned to Tom Hanna. "Howdy, young man. What can I do for you?" He dropped his own worries long enough to put cordiality into his tones.

Tom met the sharp eyes behind the iron-rimmed glasses. "I'd like to see you alone."

Nelse Cline drew up his lips, glanced back at the pile of boxes as though they called him.

"I'll check while you see him," the girl said.

The squat blond man stepped in front of her. "We haven't time to waste on strangers. We got to have some orders

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ready to go out on the morning stage."

The old man shook his head. "Losing these last wagons was bad, but the Cline Trading Post has weathered stiffer gales than that. I'll take a minute and see what this young man wants."

III

NELSE CLINE led Tom across the alley to a small office that opened off the general room of the trading post. The old man sank into a chair behind a sturdy desk and nodded to Tom. It seemed a bit strange to Tom Hanna that Nelse Cline was not more concerned over a stranger that requested to see him alone. Hadn't he thought that this might be his nephew? Tom had tried to get Dave to answer the letter and tell his uncle they were on the way, but Dave had not been one to write letters.

"You don't seem so anxious to talk," Nelse Cline said abruptly.

"I thought you might guess who I was," Tom said. "I'm Dave Cline." He wondered if his voice sounded as flat as he heard it himself.

The old man leaned forward across the desk, his hands gripping the edges. *"Dave Cline!"* he breathed. It was as though a ghost were there.

Tom felt the chill of doubt. He took the letter from his pocket and handed it across the desk. "I came as soon as I could," he said. "Your letter was slow reaching me."

Nelse Cline's eyes filled with an old light as he saw the letter. He remembered it, all right. He no more than glanced at the closely written sheets. "Yes," he said. "My letter."

A tap fell on the door and the girl came in. She had come for further directions for checking the warehouse supplies. The light from the window caught her hair and face and made her part of the sunset. There was beauty in the plainly moulded face, the beauty of strength and simplicity. Her voice was tired, but weariness and strain did not make it harsh. She paused abruptly, forgetting her errand.

"Bad news, Uncle Nelse?"

Nelse Cline steadied his breathing. "No news is bad 'til it's been proved bad," the old man said sharply. "But when this is proved, it might be bad for some. This man says he is Dave Cline—my nephew. He has my letter."

The papers in the girl's fingers fluttered to the desk, her dark, startled eyes swept Tom's face. He had risen when she entered, and now he moved close.

"You seem to know my uncle had written for me," he said to her. "Is it so strange I have come?"

Her breath was uneven, but her eyes did not fall away. "Yes. Because you are not Dave Cline."

Tom Hanna's face was like a sheet of blank paper. There was no outward sign of his racing thoughts.

Nelse Cline tapped the letter with a bony finger. "I wrote this to my nephew," he said, his voice sharper. "How did you come by it?"

"The letter belongs to me. I have told you I *am* Dave Cline."

The girl leaned toward him, her eyes glowing. She studied his face, then turned to Nelse Cline. "He has the letter," she whispered. "Maybe—maybe he is Dave."

Tom Hanna's voice laid down a cold challenge. "I came because I was sent for. I am welcomed with doubt. What *is* all this?"

Old Nelse Cline straightened. "My nephew arrived three days ago. The only thing I want to know of you is how

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you came into possession of that letter?"

Tom's mind leaped to the thick-shouldered, blond man he had seen in the warehouse. He had said he was in charge of the Cline Trading Post. Nelse Cline was leaning across the desk, eyes blazing. Suddenly he stabbed a finger at Tom.

"You stole it, that's how you got it! Dorris, bring Dave here!"

THE girl sped away to return with the man of the warehouse. She had not spoken to him evidently, for there was bewilderment in his glance when he saw the old man's stormy face. Nelse Cline shook the letter at him.

"Here is the letter that was stolen from you, and there stands the man that stole it! He says he came as quickly as he could!"

The squat man recoiled, his wide nostrils flared until his nose seemed flattened to his broad face. He recovered and came forward to a toe balance, his hand fanning the gun at his hip. "And after he stole that letter he tried to kill me with an ambush shot. Now he comes here with lies!"

"He's lower than a snake that keeps his belly to the earth all the days of his life," Nelse Cline snapped. "There isn't much law in Hassaway these days, but there's plenty to deal with this man."

"I'll call Jason Faber," the squat man said. "He does the lawin' in times like these."

Tom Hanna did not move to block the other's departure, but his low words nailed him to the floor. "This is not a matter for the law, nor for guns. Don't let your fingers clinch that walnut handle. You're in a close spot and a gun settlement is your only hope of pulling out. I'll nip any such play before it gets dangerous.

"I'm Dave Cline and I'll have no trouble proving it. I can answer any question about the family—within reason. My dad was killed seven years ago and since then I haven't kept in touch with Uncle Nelse. But I have proof with me, my dad's wallet and—"

The squat man was tense. He had weighed his chances in a gun battle, and found them uncertain. A cool-voiced, steady-eyed gunman was bad medicine. "You stole that wallet too," he shouted at Tom. "You cleaned me out of everything I owned."

Tom smiled. "I was hoping you'd be fool enough to say so. Now all Uncle Nelse will have to do is have you tell him the contents of that wallet. It only contains a few of dad's things. Any man that had ever owned the wallet would remember them all. Death notices, birth notices—dates and places."

The man before Tom was quivering, with red blotching the inner corners of his eyes. His fingers were curling above his gun. "Hand over that wallet," he ordered. "Hand it over or I'll kill you. No thief and ambush killer is going to pack my dad's wallet!"

Nelse Cline came from behind the desk. He moved swiftly, now that his mind was made up. But maybe he'd waited too long. That had always been Dave's failing, too—letting things get into too big a swing before he drew cards. That had contributed to his death in that last fight. Cline stepped between the two heirs apparent and held out a hand toward Tom.

"I'll take that wallet."

Tom began to reach with his left hand toward his inner vest pocket. The squat man's eyes were racing, too nervous to focus. He glanced through the open window across a vacant space to Main Street. A tall man was walking along the path, wearing a brace of guns.

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"There's Jason Faber now!" The relief that comes to a prisoner who finds his cell door opened, was in the blond man's voice. "This fellow here is dangerous, Uncle Nelse, he tried to shoot me in the back. We'll have Faber step in."

As he moved forward, the girl was before him driving him from the window. Her dark eyes held strange lights. "We do not need Jason Faber," she said.

Tom Hanna's hand that was reaching for the letter became still. His right dropped to his holster with such ease the movement seemed robbed of menace. But the squat man did not read it that way. He drew back as he was reaching to push the girl aside.

"You've done a lot of shouting," Tom said. "You've tried to mix things up. It hasn't worked. The girl is right, we don't need help to settle this."

The man turned on the girl. "It means plenty to you to have me thrown out!"

Nelse Cline snapped up the words. "We'll have none of that. Dorris Brown is my niece and I have provided well for her. She does not want any of her cousin's share."

"Women love gold. They never have enough!"

"I said there'd be no more such talk." The old man leveled his voice at Tom Hanna. "Get your hand away from your holster unless you want me to call in the deadliest gunman that ever walked in shoe-leather. Hand over the wallet."

TOM'S hand swung away from his gun with deceptive lightness. It satisfied the old man, but removed none of the strain from the younger one. Tom pulled a worn leather wallet from his inner vest pocket and handed it over to Nelse Cline.

The squat man straightened and stepped backward toward the door. Injury was pressed into his voice when he spoke.

"Uncle Nelse, you must know in your heart that this man is an impostor. I won't stay and be questioned like some thief that's busted into your home. I won't breathe the same air with this man that robbed me and then tried to ambush me.

"Go ahead and hear what he has to say and then send for me. I'll be in the warehouse checkin' so's to get off that letter on the mornin' stage. When we're alone, I'll tell you everything that's in that wallet—*everything*. My dad give it to me and I reckon I ain't forgot nothin' of what's in it."

His words rounded off with a fine show of indignation. Tom wondered if he were taking this opportunity of complete escape, then decided not. The eyes held too much hatred. He was merely maneuvering for time. He was not relinquishing such a rich strike as the Cline Trading Post without a fight.

Nelse Cline made no move to stop him. The old man's eyes were narrowed behind his iron-rimmed glasses, and they told little. He spoke to the girl. "Fetch a lamp."

Twilight was settling rapidly. It was still light outside, but when Nelse Cline lowered the blind to the one window, the room was almost dark. He gave no explanation for this last act, but it proved to Tom that he had not been taken in by the squat man's show of innocence. The girl returned with a small lamp already burning. As she placed it on the desk, the old man waved for her to go. She hesitated.

"Hear this man without prejudice, Uncle Nelse," she breathed.

The old man met her eyes severely. "You turned against Dave—because,

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he asked me to make out the will. That was not fair. There's other things need to be considered. I have lost much freight—there has to be a stop put to that immediately. A man does not go into a fight until he knows where he stands."

"He hounded you into fixing the will," the girl said dully. "I have never trusted him!"

The old man turned her toward the door. "You may go now."

She brushed close to Tom as she left. Their eyes met. "I wish you luck," she whispered and was gone.

IV

TOM HANNA drew a chair close to the old homemade desk and looked across its scarred top to Nelse Cline. "I did not know I had a cousin," he said. "Dad thought the three of us were the last of the Clines."

"I had never mentioned to him my sister's baby that I took as my own. You do not seem pleased to learn of Dorris." The old man's eyes raked his face, the words had been sharp.

"You raised her," Tom said. "Then she is really your daughter. She—not some nephew you have never even seen—should come into this trading post."

"I have provided well for Dorris. This post is not a plaything for a woman to handle."

Tom's body felt stiff and cold. He was robbing a girl. Dave had not known of her. The old man continued to comb every line of his face.

"Did you not know I had a sister?" he asked.

Tom started a bit, his mind had been away. He had been trying to reach across the space to Dave, to tell him that even to keep that last promise he could not rob a girl. "Yes, I knew of your sister," he answered. "Great-aunt Elisa."

The old man blinked. "You didn't know that by chance," he said.

"No, I couldn't know that by chance. She was not often mentioned. Dad wondered why you didn't give her a lift. You helped him after he had made a mistake."

The old man's face twitched. "You must be Dave Cline," he said.

"No," Tom Hanna said quietly, his steady glance pouring across the desk, "I am not Dave Cline. Dave is dead. He sent me here in his place, but he didn't know about Dorris. Dave was just willing me his part, he didn't know he was robbing anybody. Neither did I."

The old man did not speak for a few seconds. Then, "You say my nephew is dead?"

Tom Hanna began to speak in a low voice, mindful of the open window beyond the drawn blind. He spread out the pattern of his and Dave's life for the old man's inspection. He finished with the grave in New Mexico.

"I know it's right with Dave for me to break my promise," he said. "He'd be the last one to hurt a girl. But I'd sure take it as a favor if you'd let me stay and work on this freight-stealing business."

"Dave is dead," the old man whispered, looking into the bare walls. The grayness of his face showed how much he had counted on a man of his own blood to stand at his side. But Nelse Cline had built up along the Oregon Trail by squaring his shoulders in the face of defeat. He did that now.

"Shelt Faber has built a store since the rush started, but he wants to rob every man that comes staggering along the trail, desperate for supplies. Shelt and I have fought it out in words, and

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now it looks like he's carrying the fight to the freight wagons that are the life of a post same as blood is the life of the body. A post must have supplies, and it must be stocked ahead for the winter."

Tom told him what he had overheard before the Faber Mercantile. "Faber isn't a man to trust," he finished, "but he seemed disturbed over hearing you'd lost another load of freight."

"No. Faber is not a man to trust," Nelse Cline returned flatly. "Neither is his brother Jason. Hassaway businessmen throw in and hire Faber to keep law in town, because the sheriff is two weeks' ride away. Faber keeps law by building up the graveyard; his two guns are as poisonous as twin rattlers."

Nelse Faber ceased speaking as Tom held up a hand. They both strained listening ears. Tom rose.

"There's someone outside our door." He moved swiftly and threw back the door but only the gloom of the big front room met them. Tom pointed to the door leading to the alley. It was open.

"He's been listening!" Nelse Cline cried. "He's heard enough to know his lies have caught up with him!"

He was on his feet now.

Tom drew his gun as he ran lightly for the alley. As he leaped into the night, Dorris Brown rose from a bench beside the back door. Tom heard her catch her breath at the violence and suddenness of his appearance. He raced on down the alley, leaving her question unanswered. He traveled the length of both warehouses, and still had not caught sight of a fleeing figure. A square of light at the back of the second building attracted Tom's attention and he crouched to peer inside.

THE man who had come to Hassaway as Dave Cline was close to the open window and seemed to be studying a freight sheet. He was composed, he had not just dived in here from a run down the alley, Tom was certain of that. His breathing was regular and slow.

Tom slipped away from the window, afraid his own strained breathing might give him away. Whoever had been listening outside that door had gotten away. Who else besides this impostor would be interested in hearing? Who else besides him, knew that Nelse Cline and the stranger were having a talk?

Dorris Brown had been there beside the back door. He decided to ask how long she had been there and if she had seen anyone leave the post. He walked slowly trying to match together the bits of information he had. The other merchant, Shelt Faber, would reap huge benefits if Nelse Cline's post could be shorted on supplies, yet Faber had not rejoiced at the news of the last robbery. And now someone not the man posing as Dave Cline had sneaked into the post to overhear a conversation.

The false Dave Cline had boasted that he would list the contents of the wallet. How could he? That wallet had never been out of Dave's possession in the seven years Tom had known him.

A woman's sharp cry bit through Tom's cogitation. The sound had come from the open window of the office where he had left Nelse Cline. Tom had a half a block to run before he reached the back door. Three men from the street were entering by the front way. The big room was now lighted, the rays from a swinging lamp cutting paths in the open spots, and intensifying the shadows.

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Tom saw a tall man with two guns laced to his thighs among the men that entered the office. He followed them. Dorris Brown stood gripping the desk, the warmth of her face drained away. A body lay half hidden by the old desk. Tom saw it was Nelse Cline. The old man was dead. A knife was buried in his back.

The tall gunman turned to Tom. "What's your business here?" His voice and eyes were under perfect control. He was as cold and sure as steel. Tom did not need to hear the others address him as Faber to know who he was. Nelse Cline had been right to tag him as deadly. His voice was quiet, but menace needs no fanfare. The question turned all eyes to Tom.

"I am Dave Cline," he answered quietly. "My uncle wrote for me to come. I was talking to him a few moments ago. We heard a noise and I went to investigate. The murderer must have been hiding in the big room as I ran for the alley."

"Dave Cline!" Jason Faber exploded the name. "How many Dave Clines are there?"

"One. I had satisfied my uncle that this other is a fraud."

Faber's palms whispered at his guns. "Then you better get to proving it to us. You were the last man that saw Nelse Cline alive. If you're the real nephew, you can prove it. If not, you're in a tight spot."

"If you're not, we'll swing you by the neck before the night's an hour older!" It was one of the other men that spoke.

Two more men entered from the street, Shelt Faber, the merchant, and his clerk. Jason Faber spoke to his brother.

"Find that heavyset fellow that claims he is Dave Cline. Get him here without letting him know anything's wrong."

Shelt Faber looked at the body lying on the floor and breathed a curse. Then he obeyed his brother's order. Dorris Brown turned to the two men with Jason Faber.

"This stranger brought Uncle Nelse's letter with him, and a wallet. Uncle Nelse was — favorably impressed."

Tom turned to her in quick thanks. She was struggling to keep down prejudice until he had had a fair hearing. Jason Faber spoke quietly.

"He was the last man known to have talked to your uncle. It would seem to me the old man's favorable impression hadn't lasted. That murder was done before Nelse Cline could expose him."

The girl stiffened. "I don't believe it," she said. "I believe he is the *real* Dave Cline!"

Faber's flat eyes glistened. The other men in the room bent toward Dorris Brown. "You mean this first feller was tryin' to take old Nelse in 'fore the real nephew got here?"

"Yes! He hurried Uncle Nelse into making a will. Then this man came and he was about to lose out." She stopped abruptly, realizing her words were equal to a murder charge against the other man.

Jason Faber laughed. "It'll all come out soon enough, the law of Hassaway will decide who's guilty. You've been mighty outspoken, Miss Brown."

"And she's right," Tom Hanna said. "I did not kill Nelse Cline."

V

SHELT FABER returned. He shoved the squat man into the office, and blocked the doorway behind him. The squat man hunched his thick shoulders,

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his startled eyes racing around the room. He saw the body on the floor and a tremor shook him. He spun on Tom Hanna.

"You done that! I tried to get Uncle Nelse not to talk with you alone!"

"Your bluff won't work," Tom said to him. "I proved to Nelse Cline that I was his nephew, and I can prove it to these men. There is the wallet you claim I stole. If that wallet ever did belong to you, you will be able to tell what's in it."

"Where's this wallet?" Jason Faber snapped the question.

"In Nelse Cline's pocket," Tom answered.

Faber ordered his brother to get it. Shelt Faber stepped toward the body half hidden behind the desk. The squat man made a move toward his gun, but it was clumsy and slow. Jason Faber whipped up a weapon to cover him.

"Keep your paw away from that holster," he commanded.

"Looks like he ain't relishin' the chance to tell what's in that wallet," one of the men whispered.

The squat man blustered. "I know every paper that's in it. That wallet belonged to my dad and come into my hands at his death. This killer here is bankin' on me not rememberin' the stuff. *I do.*"

Shelt Faber rose with the worn wallet in his hand. "Is this the one?"

Dorris Brown reached for it, "Yes," she answered. "I will examine it."

Shelt Faber's smile was very thin as he surrendered the wallet. "You conduct things, Miss Brown," he said. "Then there can't possibly be any charges of—crooked work."

She did not flinch before the sarcasm, but her fingers shook as she held the wallet close to the lamp. Three clippings from old newspapers fell out.

The squat man turned on Tom with fierce triumph. "Your string is played out!" Slowly, thinking a little between words, he began to tell of death and birth notices. Deathly white, Dorris Brown nodded.

Tom did not need her confirmation, he had studied those old clippings. Empty pressure closed about him, for a second his thoughts blurred. Then they cleared and his blood iced. He had been tricked. The battle could no longer be won by words. In another minute these men would be clamoring for his life; and with him dead, Dorris Brown would be robbed. The store an old man had built up would pass into the hands of his murderer. And he had promised Dave Cline he would take care of things.

The squat man finished speaking. Dorris Brown dropped the wallet to the desk. Jason Faber spoke to her.

"You say this stranger was talking to your uncle a short time before you found the old man murdered?"

She nodded.

"And he came from this room and leaped into the alley without a word to you?"

She did not look at Faber, her glance went past him and flattened against the wall. "Yes," she said.

"You had better leave, Miss Brown."

Shelt Faber moved from the doorway to give her passageway. Her steps were dragging at first, then they broke to a run. The tap of her feet on the floor came back to the silent room. Then the bang of the front door.

WITH her departure, the men in the office cut loose the breath they had held imprisoned. They had feared the stranger might try to use the girl as part cover in a break for freedom. They surged forward, growls and curses welling. Jason Faber ordered them back.

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"There's no call for more of a trial than he's had," Faber said. "He named his own test and lost. We'll do his hanging orderly, no shouting mob pulling on the rope. This is the law of Hassaway and things are going to be done right. Jerk his gun, somebody."

Tom Hanna made a feint toward the door Shelt Faber was blocking, then he shot for the light. He fell forward on his face as his gun cracked, and he felt the steam of Jason's bullet as he went down. Jason Faber had been too sure of his man. When Tom Hanna had not tried to use the girl for protection, Faber had thought he was afraid.

That half move toward the door had helped, the gunman was leaping that way as the room plunged to darkness. But Tom was diving for the blind that he knew was drawn over an open window. As he hurled his body through the opening the room behind him woke to an understanding of the trick that had been played. Men lunged in a solid block for the window.

Tom was on his feet and running for the alley. Wild shots were pumped into the darkness, but wilder than these was the anger of Jason Faber. The men had crushed forward and blocked any move he might have made.

Tom ran down the alley toward the livery stable. He zigzagged to keep to tree shadows, and slipped along a feeding corral to the end of the right wing of the barn. It was slow finding the door for he had not inspected the place for a quick getaway when he had ridden up. He found the door open, and stepped inside. His horses were in the main, or center, barn. Grabbing just any animal was too risky, it might not even be broken to ride. Tom had noticed lots of driving stuff and mules about the place.

A flood of men was pouring down the alley and Tom winced to realize how quickly the town had turned out to run him down.

"Watch he don't get a horse!" came a yell that rattled through the sprawling barn. "Lock the back doors!"

Tom was forced to pull to shelter as a man came running toward the back. The door he had entered was jerked shut and a padlock clicked.

"There won't be nobody sneakin' outa there tonight," came a voice. "What's the ruckus, Mack?"

"That stranger that come in with two horses this evenin' just killed Nelse Cline. Beefed him cold."

"What's Jason Faber so lathered up about? Him and his brother would be pleased to have old Nelse out of the way so's they'd have the store business to themselves. Like as not them Fabers hired this stranger to beef old Nelse!"

Tom knew it was no use trying for his horses. If he reached them, those padlocked doors would stop him anyhow. He moved to a square window behind a stall and threw a leg over. It was a tight squeeze and high from the ground, but he managed it without sound. He found the gate to a feeding corral and let down a bar. Soon two friendly noses rubbed at him. Tom felt of the big heads, some freighter's team. He let down the other bars and cracked one of the big horses to a trot.

"Who's over by that corral?" came a sharp query from the rear of the stable. The searchers were being mighty careful not to shoot each other.

Tom was already crawling away.

"Better speak up!" The voice held a nervous threat. Then a whoop went up. "Ned Caster's team has been turned loose!"

Mounted men dashed for the alley. Saloon patrons that had had horses at

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hitching rails had thrown to saddle and were beating up streets and alleys. Jason Faber's voice soared in high command.

"Run down every one of 'Caster's horses. It won't be hard to catch those big hoofs."

TOM crawled farther from the corral. When it was safe, he rose and covered ground faster. Faber would throw a guard around the town to make certain his man didn't slip into the hills. Then he would begin a careful, unhurried search of buildings. There was only one place in Hassaway that might escape inspection—the Cline Trading Post. Under cover of the excitement attending the escaped freighter team, Tom was returning to this haven.

The alley back of the store was quiet as he drew near. The light still burned in the big room and the back door was open. He dropped down behind some empty boxes as someone approached from the warehouse. It was Dorris Brown. A desire to speak to her surged over Tom as she paused in the doorway, but he knew it would be dangerous to both of them. If guns should be waiting inside the store, they'd open up without regard for the girl.

Heavy steps sounded within the store. The girl stiffened and waited in the dim light. The man who was claiming to be Dave Cline joined her.

"Faber has ordered the women off the streets, Dorris," he said. "He don't want nobody gummin' things up when he gets that killer cornered."

"I am going home," the girl said. "I was just making sure the warehouses were locked. Uncle Nelse always did that the last thing."

"I saw the keys was gone from the nail. Give them to me, I'm seein' to things from now on."

They stood dimly outlined, and it seemed to Tom their glances must be clashing. Then the girl extended the keys. "The warehouses are yours—now," she said. "If you need me for anything in running the post, send for me."

"You ain't bein' very nice, Dorris," the man snarled. "You never have been. And I've heard about you standin' up for that other gent, brandin' me as the fake. It ain't settin' very well."

The girl moved by him into the store. Other voices were coming into the alley now. Tom crouched closer to his shelter.

"That killer has slicked out hide and hair," one of the pair said as he approached the man in the doorway. "From the way he matched wits and guns with Jason Faber and come out on top, I'd say he ain't going to be easy to take."

The squat man went to meet them, his voice was strident as he spoke. "We don't want to take him—alive! Faber's orders is to cut down on sight."

The three talked a moment, then the squat man closed the back door, locked it, and went away to aid in the search. The light still burned in the store, and Tom wondered if the front door was open, and if Dorris Brown was still there. If he could talk with her, he could convince her of his honesty the same as he had Nelse Cline. She could see her uncle's friends and arrange for a fair trial. Perhaps the squat man had already thought of these things, that was why he was determined to finish Tom Hanna off tonight, either by rope or bullet.

TOM crept toward the front of the store. It was dangerous, but Dorris Brown might still be at the Cline post. She was not. The front door was closed and the big room empty. The swinging lamp still burned, cutting its bright paths

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in open space, piling up shadows against boxes and counters.

He circled back through the alley and came to the office window through which he had dived to freedom. The blind was gone, but the window had not been closed. Quietly he crawled inside the small room.

He lay a second making sure no one had spotted him. Noises in the street were quieting. Only occasionally now did a horse tear down the street or alley. Guards were perhaps stationed and riding their beats without confusion, men on foot were probably searching buildings.

The body of Nelse Cline had been removed, and Tom could smell the odor of soap. Bloodstains had been washed away. Never again would the old man that had built up this post set foot inside it. Already a strange hand was holding the keys.

Tom's breath choked him. The business Nelse Cline had spent his life to building, was being stolen. A girl was being robbed; and Dave Cline was being robbed.

Tom Hanna reached out to the old desk, his fingers slid along its surface. It seemed somehow a part of the old man. The tightness eased in Tom's throat.

The door between the office and large main room was not locked and Tom made his way to the small storeroom that he had noticed when he had first entered the Cline Post. That door too was unlocked. He entered and found a hiding place back among some boxes. He arranged a pile of saddle blankets for a bed. He would be safe here, even though it did mean a night of inaction. Tomorrow there would come a moment when he would have the squat man alone, and that would be the payoff. With the man whom Hassaway regarded as the real Dave Cline out of the picture, the post would revert to Dorris Brown.

Tom tried to figure things out, now that he had time to think. Who had killed Nelse Cline? The squat man had not, he had been checking freight. Shelt Faber might have had the job done, but why would Faber remove an old man from his path when the reins would fall to the hands of a younger and stronger enemy? And how had the man posing as Dave Cline known the contents of that wallet?

At times Tom toyed with the idea that this impostor had known Dave Cline and had seen the wallet. He might have known of the letter Dave had received from old Nelse. But that didn't work into the picture. This man believed Tom Hanna to be Dave Cline, that was why he was rushing his death.

TOM drifted into a light sleep and dreamed of Dorris Brown. She was again facing that hostile room, declaring her confidence in the stranger who claimed to be her cousin. He awakened and dozed during the night and at last opened his eyes to find sunlight entering a small, high window.

He straightened cautiously on his blankets. He caught a movement in the room to the front. Silently he repiled the saddle blankets, and crept closer to the door that he had left open a crack. He heard the tap of a hammer and saw a man with a red blanket on his arm. They were shutting away the sunlight from the big front room. This was Hassaway's expression of mourning for the old man that had built up the post. Today the store would be dark.

Tom Hanna was cautious through the hours that followed. If he were discovered, the town of Hassaway would swarm down upon the Cline post and do

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away with the man accused of killing Nelse Cline.

This was the thing the squat, blond man was hoping would happen, it was the thing Tom was guarding against. If he were to die now, Dorris Brown would be robbed, and she would always believe him guilty of a terrible crime. He remembered how she had looked at him as she left him alone with Nelse Cline, and wished him luck. And she had expressed her belief in him before her uncle's friends. He wanted to live to vindicate himself, and to see again that warm light of trust in her eyes.

Out front somebody was stirring. The two men who had tacked up the blankets to the windows had long been gone. Tom crept out so he might see into the main room. The boy he had seen sweeping the store yesterday was there and he was making ready to scrub. His face was serious and his eyes red and troubled. He set to work with fierce earnestness.

When steps came to the back door, the boy stood awkwardly, the rag dangling in his fingers. Dorris Brown and a tall man well in his fifties, came into the store.

"You don't need to scrub the shelves today, Dan," the girl said. "Mr. Myres and I were looking for you. It's nearly time for the funeral. You must come along."

"I shoulda scrubbed two days ago," the boy answered. "Mr. Cline told me I could leave the scrubbin' go 'til my arm got better. I never told him it'd got plumb better."

Dorris laid a hand on his shoulder. "Uncle Nelse was never hard on anyone. You must come now and get into your good suit and new shoes. You and I will go together."

Tom could see her face. Her eyes had traveled to the long shelves of neatly arranged goods. "Uncle Nelse loved to see the store well stocked and neat," she said. "I hope it will always be that way."

The boy skuffed his bare feet on the floor. "I hope so, but Mr. Dave cusses at a lot of things. I wonder—if he's goin' to like the post?"

They were walking toward the door. The tall man had not said a word, but Tom could see that the boy and Dorris took comfort from his being with them. The lad put the pail away with as little clatter as possible.

"Will you and me do things as usual around the post, Dorris?" he asked.

"I don't think Dave will need me," the girl said quietly, "but you must try the same as ever, Dan."

The man snapped out a few words as they were leaving. "Dave's called for the reading of Nelse's will immediately following the funeral. Couldn't wait 'til a decent time."

TOM settled back to wait. A hush crept over the town and he knew the last words were being said over Nelse Cline. When life again stirred in the street, the funeral was over. It was tedious waiting, but he was determined to play the game safely. If he had spoken to Dorris Brown when she came for the boy, the lad might have run to the street with the information that the killer the town sought was hiding in the Cline post. Or the man might have given the alarm when Tom gave his hiding place away.

It was in the heat of the afternoon that a key grated in the lock and three men entered the store from the front. The squat man was in the lead, his harsh voice puncturing the reverent atmosphere of the shadowy room.

"Look things over, Faber," he ordered.

Shelt Faber, the merchant brother of

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Jason Faber, stepped into the center of the big room and gazed about. The squat man swung on the third member of the party. It was the tall man who had come with Dorris Brown to take the lad to the funeral.

"Myres," he said, "I never asked you to come here with me, you horned in. You was the old man's lawyer, but you ain't mine. I'll sell this post at my own figure and don't want no advice. I've heard enough about family traditions and what the old man expected of me. I'm not a storekeeper and nobody is goin' to make one out of me."

Tom had moved up until he could see the lawyer and the blond man. Shelt Faber was darting about like a hungry hound. The lawyer's face was set. "I will say no more about not selling," he said, "but let me point out Shelt Faber could rob you in the price if you don't have a representative that knows the worth of this post."

"And pay him a fat sellin' fee. I'll handle things myself."

"I've never been known as a robber, Myres," came the cutting tones of Shelt Faber. "I'll pay this young man what his place is worth—"

The lawyer spun on Faber. "Nelse Cline will rise up in his grave to see this post go to you. If you're paying what the place is worth, why do you object to my being in at the deal? I'm not charging a penny for my services."

"And I'm not wanting them even for nothin'," the squat man snapped. "Is that plain, Myres?"

Tom Hanna began opening the door to a wider crack. His gun was in his hand and his eyes were opaque pools of wrath. A light was breaking over him.

Shelt Faber and the squat man were working together. Faber had known that Nelse Cline was trying to locate his lost nephew, and perhaps old Nelse had given over the effort with that last letter. Faber had imported a man and that man had hurried Nelse Cline with a will. Now the impostor would take his wages and deed the post over to Shelt Faber. No wonder Faber hadn't been pleased at the news of Cline's losses.

Tom reached out to fling open the door, when Dorris Brown appeared in the front doorway. Tom drew back. There couldn't be gunwork with the girl there.

She walked close to the squat man. "Dave," she cried, "you can't do this!"

His face set to ugly lines. "How many times do I have to listen to that? This store belongs to me. You heard the will. You have your part, so don't bother with mine."

"There would not a stick of it be yours if Uncle Nelse had thought you would sell to Shelt Faber."

Faber's eyes were resting too long on the girl. His voice came now, well oiled. "Miss Brown, your cousin is not a merchant. A business like this must have a hand on the reins that is steady. I wish you would withhold your judgment of me until you see how I shall make the old post prosper."

"Dave," the girl said as though Faber had not addressed her, "will nothing change you in this?"

"I ain't a merchant and don't intend to ever be one."

"Then you acted a lie to Uncle Nelse. He'd never have willed you this post if he'd known you only wanted the money." Her voice was low, her eyes angry. "You pretended to take an interest in the business. Dave Cline, you're lower than a snake!" She stood before him a second, driving the charge home with her blazing glance, then turned and walked out the front door.

The squat man's anger swelled his

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neck. He vented his feelings on the lawyer. "Get out, Myres! I'm sick of your old woman talk and long face!"

VI

TOM HANNA stepped from the back storeroom so softly that he cleared the doorway before he was sighted. The squat man was the first to feel the draw of his eyes. He whipped about. His hand swept downward, then tensed an inch from his holster as though smitten with paralysis.

Shelt Faber's squirrel eyes went bleak in his gray face, and his square fingers traveled upward toward his armpit. Finding the menace too great, they paused to toy with the gold nuggets of his watch chain. The lawyer leaned forward like a hound at point, his hand flickering toward his coat pocket. Perhaps every man in Hassaway had a weapon oiled up to use in bringing down the killer of Nelse Cline.

"Three to one are heavy odds," Tom said to them. "I'll be forced to kill the first man to bat a lash. Myres, get this straight, *I'm* Dave Cline. Shelt Faber and this man have been working hard at the job of getting me killed before I can prove it, but they've failed. This pair are working together—they killed Nelse Cline!"

Shelt Faber's control had returned. "You were not so smooth with your talk when Jason's gun was on your belly," he said quietly.

"You killed Cline," Tom repeated calmly. "This man you hired to impersonate Dave Cline brought you word the real nephew had arrived, and that he carried proof. The pair of you planned to get hold of that proof—the wallet with those clippings. You got hold of it, but you had to kill to do it!"

"That's a lie!" the squat man roared.

"You killed Cline," Tom repeated tonelessly. "The two of you."

Fear leaped to the squat man's eyes at the unshaken finality of the charge. Shelt Faber hurled a curse.

"You killed Cline," Tom intoned. "So I've got to kill you."

"You fool," Shelt Faber snapped. "What chance is there for you to come out alive if you make a gunplay?"

"None. I know you're packing a gun under your arm and that hanging to that nugget chain is a handy way to keep your hand in place. I know this other man will kick up considerable dust when things break. So I guess we're all three going to wind up in Hell before the clock ticks many more times."

"If you are Dave Cline," Shelt Faber said, "give yourself up, and prove it."

"And have your brother shoot me down and tell some story about a break? No, Faber. It's going to be settled right here. I'm going to get your play-actor with my first bullet, so if you should get me cold, you won't be able to steal this store from Dorris Brown. The deed you probably already have made out for this man to sign will never be signed."

The words rattled against the thick walls. Tom bent forward, his face still as stone. The body of the squat man jerked in a nervous spasm. He was the weak link in Faber's chain.

"I didn't have nothin' to do with the killin'!" he whispered.

"How did you find out what was in that wallet?" Tom's eyes were on Faber as he asked the question, and they silenced his protest. "Remember it won't take much to shove you over the brink," he jibed at the trembling man. "Just a squeeze of the finger."

"Faber brought it to me and told me to study it fast. I never knew he'd killed the old man 'til we was close to the store. He said everything was workin'

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out fine—then I saw the crowd and he said Cline was dead."

The lawyer's hand came out of his pocket with a gun. "Don't worry about Faber drawing his hide-out gun," he said to Tom Hanna. "If he makes a move, it will be his last."

SHELT FABER still held to his calm. His squirrel eyes were darting, but his fingers were steady as they clasped the nuggets of his watch chain. He was a murderer and a thief, but he had courage. He was going to go out fighting. His glance lashed hate at the crumbling figure of the man he had hired to impersonate Dave Cline.

"Faber said his brother would order him to search the body, and that I was to make a play then that would take the attention of the room while he handled the wallet. If I'd a known this job was goin' to mean murder, I'd never have took it! *I'm not a killer!*"

Shelt Faber cursed him softly. "You haven't the nerve of a flea. I'm going to open this pot and your only hope of winning is to string along with me. Draw that gun and start triggering. Myres will get paid for horning into this, I'll see to that."

Tom Hanna was bent forward, watching both men for the smallest move, when the front door opened and Jason Faber stepped swiftly inside. He swayed to his guns and they came up spraying lead. In the bat of an eye, the store was sheethed in flame.

Tom's first bullet was for the man posing as Dave Cline. He had reared up with a cry of hope at Jason Faber's entrance, and emptied his holster. But his gun clattered to his feet, his body slumped. He would never sign a thieving deed to make restless the last sleep of an old man.

Curses and snatches of words and crashing gun-roar filled the room. The lawyer had planked a bullet into Shelt Faber as he had promised he would, but Faber had not fallen. He fired and the lawyer dropped his gun with a cry and fell to one knee. Tom Hanna was backed to the wall, triggering it out with Jason Faber. The drums of death beat in his ears. He wanted the lawyer to live so he could tell Dorris about everything. But Shelt Faber was lifting a gun with a terrible threat.

Tom felt himself going forward. He had silenced the guns of Jason Faber—he must have for Jason was toppling to the floor. Tom threw his gun toward Shelt Faber. The gun bucked in his hand and Shelt Faber didn't complete the threat he was hurling at the lawyer.

Men were pouring in through the front door, tramping like cattle, shouting and bawling at each other. "They cornered the murderer! Shot it out!" Tom understood very clearly what they meant, but he couldn't speak to set them right. Then the lawyer lifted up and shouted the room to silence. Tom Hanna eased back and drifted away; it was easier to let Myres explain.

TOM opened his eyes and watched crisp curtains moving to a breeze. The sun was gone, an evening coolness was in the air. He saw Dorris Brown and smiled. She placed a palm on his forehead.

"Lie still, Dave. Don't worry."

Tom Hanna didn't, as the days passed. He was soon in a chair on the porch, and one evening Dorris began to tell him what had been happening around the post. The lawyer called and said he'd be glad when Dave was able to take hold of things at the store.

"But this load of freight got through without being run over a mountain," he observed. "I wonder if the Fabers

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were back of that hard luck we had?"

"I don't think so," Tom answered, remembering Shelt Faber's attitude at hearing of the loss. "Nope, I think Shelt Faber figured that freight as already his." His eyes lost their lazy light. "I'll have to get out of here and onto the trail of those thieves."

He called Dorris Brown back when she would have left them. "It's time I told you the whole truth. I'm not Dave Cline." He caught her hand. "Don't be frightened about it. Uncle Nelse knew and he was going to trust me." Tom looked at the lawyer. "You can tear up that will. I'll be around though until I find out who is working on the freight outfits."

Then Tom Hanna told of his promise to Dave Cline, his voice matter-of-fact and his eyes steadily on the girl's face.

The lawyer nodded as Tom talked. "You and Dave must have been good friends," he said. "Leastwise you didn't spare yourself none when you took over his job." Then he noticed the pale face of Dorris Brown. "You don't look like a young lady that had just had a big trading post handed to you. There are even tears in your eyes."

"But I have just lost my cousin." She tried to smile with the words. "Uncle Nelse always planned on finding Dave to take over the post. It's—it's too big a job for a woman."

The lawyer chuckled as he rose. He saw that Tom Hanna was upset by the girl's tears, and was trying to think of what to say.

"Maybe Tom can think of some way to lighten your burden," he said, moving off the low step. "If I were a young buck like him, and a pretty girl was crying, I bet I'd think of something nice to say." He smiled to himself as he moved down the path to the street.

"I'll stay until everything is going smooth," Tom Hanna promised. He noticed then that he was still holding her hand, so he tightened his grip.

She looked into his eyes and spoke solemnly. "Do you promise that, Tom, to stay until there is nothing more to worry about?"

Without knowing why, he used a child's promise, and his voice was very earnest. He said:

"Cross my heart, Dorris."

She smiled. "Uncle Nelse kept the post alive for close to forty years, and he said there never was a day when fresh trouble didn't bob up. That makes your job a long one."

Her fingers tightened on his. And she had stopped crying.

Happy Relief From Painful Backache

Caused by Tired Kidneys

Many of those gnawing, nagging, painful backaches people blame on colds or strains are often caused by tired kidneys — and may be relieved when treated in the right way.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)

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MEN of
THE OLD GUARD
(FOR FINLAND AND DEMOCRACY)
THE OLD GUARD STANDS EVER READY TO SHAKE OFF ITS YEARS AND COME BACK TO FIGHT AGAIN FOR AN IDEAL—WHEN THAT IDEAL IS DEMOCRACY!
Gen.
De Grancourt
(IN HIS PRIVATE'S UNIFORM)
GENERAL CLEMENT DE GRANCOURT RETIRED FROM THE FRENCH ARMY A FEW YEARS AGO WITH CITATIONS FOR DISTINGUISHED SERVICE IN AFRICA AND IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR, WITH THE GRAND CROSS OF THE LEGION OF HONOR AND FOUR ROWS OF CAMPAIGN RIBBONS ON HIS CHEST.
LAST SEPTEMBER THE GENERAL SOUGHT TO RETURN TO ACTIVE SERVICE. THE ONLY WAY HE COULD DO SO, THE BRASS HATS DECREED, WAS BY RE-ENLISTING—AS A PRIVATE! HE BECAME PRIVATE DE GRANCOURT. WHEN RUSSIA INVADED FINLAND, DE GRANCOURT, AT THE AGE OF 67, WAS RELEASED TO ASSUME THE POST OF COMMANDER OF THE FINNISH FOREIGN LEGION.
CARL VON HAARTMAN, SOLDIER AND DAREDEVIL, FOUGHT FOR FINLAND BEFORE, IN ITS WAR FOR INDEPENDENCE. IN AMERICA HE ACTED AS MILITARY EXPERT FOR "WINGS" AND OTHER MOVIES. TWICE WOUNDED AND PROMOTED A COLONEL WHILE SERVING IN SPAIN, HE MADE A BEE LINE FOR FINLAND WHEN THE RUSSIANS STARTED MOVING IN.
Von Haartman

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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DARING
by STOCK-ALLEN
VON HAARTMAN WAS SEVERELY WOUNDED AND DECORATED FOR CONSPICUOUS BRAVERY LEADING A BATTALION IN THE LAKE LADOGA SECTOR.
WAR IN FINLAND
WILLIAM H. WALLACE, COLUMBIA GRAD AND A STOCK-BROKER WHEN THE FIRST WORLD WAR BROKE OUT, ENLISTED WITH THE FAMOUS LAFAYETTE ESCADRILLE AND SOON WAS AN ACE WITH THREE CITATIONS, THE CROIX DE GUERRE WITH PALMS AND MEMBERSHIP IN THE FRENCH LEGION OF HONOR.
AN ARDENT UPHOLDER OF DEMOCRACY AND A CHAMPION OF THE WEAK AGAINST THE STRONG, ALTHOUGH OVER 50, WALLACE LEFT HIS BUSINESS TO FLY A FINNISH PURSUIT SHIP. HE WAS SOON CREDITED WITH DOWNING THREE RUSSIAN PLANES!
ALIX LUCAS-NAUDIN WON THE CROIX DE GUERRE FOR BRAVERY AS A FRONT LINE NURSE IN THE WORLD WAR. DIRECTOR OF A MOROCCO HOSPITAL, SHE VOLUNTEERED FOR SERVICE IN FINLAND AND FLEW TO HELSINKI FOR IMMEDIATE ACTIVE SERVICE WITH OTHERS OF THE OLD GUARD.

Coming soon: Alfred Court—Animal Trainer

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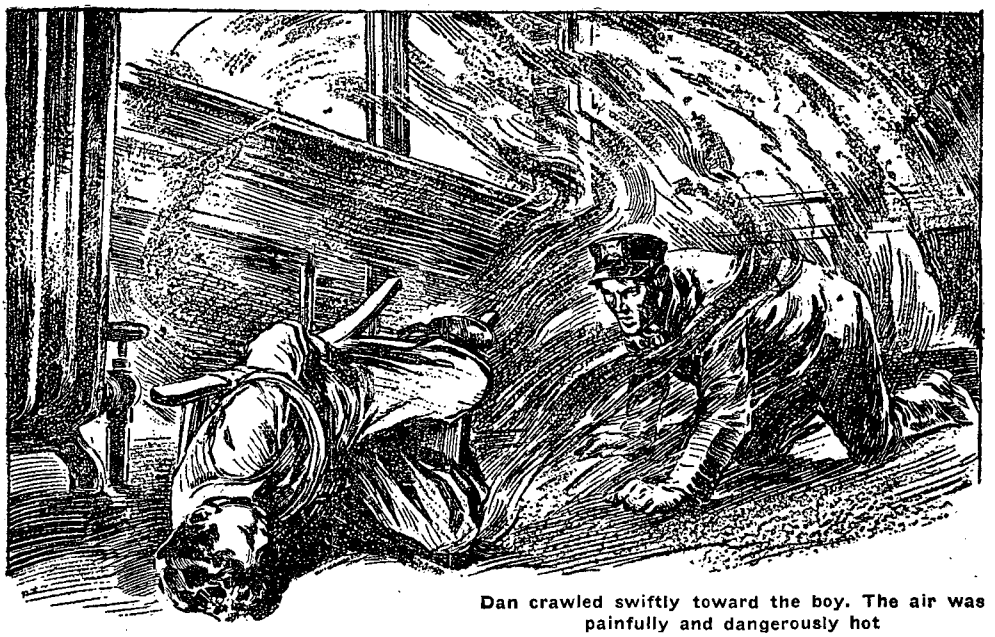
Man of the Flame



Dan crawled swiftly toward the boy. The air was painfully and dangerously hot

Just another kid who wanted to be a fireman; just another kid to get in the way. But when the test came, he proved that he could eat smoke with the best of them; and it was the best of them that brought him out

By MAURICE BEAM

Author of "Don't Look Now", "The Wind Won't Tell", etc.

THE pall of smoke which overhung the city had become a pall of fear, for people knew there was a firebug loose. The newspapers hinted it. Later, an overzealous newscaster blurted it into the ether from a local station. The result was something very near mass hysteria.

The talkative radio announcer seemed to take pleasure in pointing out that there had been three mystery fires in a row, all in the same district: Acme Body Works, Intercity Venetian Blind factory, and the lying-in hospital on Quincy Street.

At the hospital a score of mothers and expectant mothers, nurses and doctors had narrowly escaped being roasted alive. At Intercity a woman worker was burned severely, would die; a fireman was crushed beneath a falling wall. Money losses were more than half a million.

It was pretty definitely established, though police and fire officials had dodged inquiries, that an intensive manhunt for a firebug was under way. A pyromaniac. The radio speaker rolled the word and made of it a bogey. Protests came in, but it was too late.

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Men talked of lynching. The mayor and Fire Chief Andy Loughran were beleaguered with telephone threats, warnings, false clues and demands to "do something about it."

Then came the Reagan Laundry fire; and Captain Dan Croy saw the firebug—would have caught him if it hadn't been for the Leffingwell boy.

Croy, of Engine Company 7, was stocky, tough, black-haired and red-cheeked. The thousand-gallon pumper he commanded was brand new and fast; but even without that it would have been first in at Reagan's because it was closest.

As the pumper slowed to a hydrant, Captain Croy took one look at the flame-reddened darkness over the four-story laundry building and ordered his driver to the nearest alarm box for more help. Then he leaped from the truck and sprinted to the rear of the burning structure.

This was his duty: to learn what he could as to causes of the fire for future report. At the moment thoughts of a firebug were not uppermost in his mind. But, as he neared the door, they became so.

A TALL man was emerging from the door, running. Captain Croy caught a startling vision of broad, thin shoulders, slightly hunched, loose-swung arms, a long, white hand holding to a flapping hat-brim and the rapid backward glance as the fellow sprang away.

"You there! Hold on!"

Dan leaped after him, aware dimly of other faces in the gathering throng beyond, aware too of the sound of sirens in the distance as apparatus units raced for this spot.

"Stop him! Stop that man!"

He could still see the fellow. He was gaining on him. Then all at once a vague small shape got in his path and he swerved, stumbling. He pulled up on hands and knees, swearing.

"Infernal jackass . . ."

He got up, brushing himself off, slightly confused. The object he had stumbled over was a small, chubby boy, abject, stammering shrilly something about, "Captain, I was chasin' him, too. I didn't see you, sir. I'm awful sorry, sir."

It was the Leffingwell boy.

"Go home, you young idiot," Dan stormed angrily, "or I'll have you run in. Your mother ought to beat the pants off of you!"

He heard a policeman's whistle just then and yelled. The cop came running. In twenty words, Dan told him about the man he had seen. The cop gave chase, still blowing his whistle. But the tall stranger was out of sight in the darkness.

Dan trotted to the door of the building.

In the street, engine 7 had its lines strung ready for charging, dragging them in toward the laundry across a vacant lot. Other engine and hose companies were spreading out on two sides. A battalion chief shouted orders. Dan found it impossible to advance more than ten feet into the ground floor. He spent five minutes here before the heat forced him out. But by that time he found what he expected to find. If there had been any lingering doubt in his mind, it vanished now.

This blaze, too, had been set. Expertly. Apparently on more than one floor. The odor of gasoline was powerful and there was also a fainter odor of phosphorous. The sprinkler system had been shut off. Dan could even trace an incendiary trailer, a blazing train of soaked rags and newspapers which disappeared into a wall of flame.

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Apparently the fire had spread faster than expected. The tall man had nearly been caught in his own trap.

WHEN Chief Andy Loughran arrived following the second alarm Dan reported to him. They stood at the rim of the circling glow while scores of firemen worked and sweated and shouted about them and a jam of civilians stood packed just beyond the fire-lines.

Loughran listened with his white old head bent and his mottled eyes flashing.

"Who is this blasted boy?"

Dan said grimly: "Richie Leffingwell. You know, sir. A kid who wants to be a fireman when he grows up. Hangs around the engine house. Lives somewhere over on Lacey Street with his mother. Goes to fires."

"I suppose you let him ride the wagons once in a while," said the chief noncommittally.

"Once in a while, sir, to small stuff. But next time I see him I'm going to slap his ears down." Dan's face was beet-colored.

Loughran told him slowly, "The mayor's calling for an investigation, I heard. We're going to get a riding, all of us."

"Why, sir?" But Dan knew.

"For not putting a stop to incendiarism. The whole town's crazy over these fires in this district."

"But it's not our—"

"I know, Captain." Loughran spoke soberly. "But somebody's going to be the goat and it'll be in the fire department. The mayor's pets are all on the police force."

"It's their job as much as ours. We're not detectives."

"Sure. Only maybe we'd better be. This probe, as the papers are calling it, will likely lead to charges before the civil service board."

Under the smoke-grime on his face, Dan paled. Chief Loughran's frankness made the thing serious. Firemen had been broken for less than this, sacrificed to appease angry citizens' committees.

And it was this district—his—that would suffer. The offering might be a battalion chief, or it might be a captain—a captain named Dan Croy.

At the moment he hated the Leffingwell kid, he could have beaten him silly.

Two firemen were hurt before the night was over, before the Reagan Laundry was reduced to a mass of smouldering bricks and twisted machinery. There was little salvage. A laid fire is likely to be an efficient and ghastly one.

One of the injured—Hood—was in Dan's company. Hood had a wife and six children. He would lose a leg and be retired on half pay. His kids were all young and from now on they wouldn't get enough to eat, not on half pay.

Dan saw Hood as they put him into the ambulance. He would never forget Hood's blackened face with its outjutting jaw and dished-in nose and the way Hood tried to smile up at him.

An hour after midnight Rafferty, a ladderman from the station on Lancaster Avenue, fell twenty feet when unidentified gases in smoke reached his lungs. He was unconscious when picked up. Fumes from burning silk, it was thought, had wreathed Rafferty's head and poisoned him.

Rafferty came to in the ambulance, fighting and raving. He would lie strapped to a hospital bed for days, without knowing his wife, without knowing anybody. He would die ten

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years ahead of his time, after his fall had been long forgotten.

When engine 7 at last pulled away, morning papers were on the streets with headlines shouting of the "fourth fire of unknown origin within two weeks." There was also brief mention of the forthcoming hearing to be called by the mayor.

Nothing was said of the firebug. So far the police had kept silent. But in time the thing would come out. The mayor's investigation wouldn't be soft-pedaled.

Dan was not surprised when he was summoned to the chief's office that afternoon at two o'clock. He had finished the laborious task of washing oil and soot from his hair and soot and smoke from his respiratory system. He had not slept.

At this preliminary hearing it was Dan who bore the brunt of the quiz. Loughran defended him as best he could; but the mayor, who was a lawyer, was sarcastic. Dan had to admit that he had allowed the firebug to escape.

Although they didn't say so flatly, he knew that it was himself who was marked for sacrifice at a subsequent civil service board meeting. That would mean probation at best; it might mean suspension.

At the bottom of it all, of course, was the Leffingwell boy. He had ruined a career.

And then the pup had the nerve to come to the station, asking for Dan.

"LAD here to see you, Captain," the recruit on watch called up through the pole-hole that evening.

Dan came down the brass pole swiftly. At first he could not believe it. He glared at the Leffingwell boy, who was standing near the outer door watching him, his brown eyes glassy with nervousness, his tongue licking at his lips.

But standing straight for all that, and not cringing. He was twelve years old and didn't believe in crying.

Dan caught the boy's arm and pulled him outside into darkness. Then he jerked him around a corner of the station.

"You little—"

His hand came up swiftly. He slapped the round white face lifted to him, slapped it hard, four times, backward and forward.

"You got a nerve . . ."

He felt the chunky figure tremble and the boy gasped:

"I wanted to tell you—I didn't mean to get in your way. I was there—watching that man. I saw him in there—"

"Shut up," Dan ordered. "I ought to—" His hand lifted again.

The Leffingwell boy stopped talking. He met Dan's eyes and his lower lip moved up and down jerkily. Dan figured this straight-looking at him was brazenness, as was this coming to the station making excuses. He had liked the kid before; now he hated him.

"You dirty brat. You a fireman! Why you haven't got sense enough to sweep the streets."

He pushed the boy away, roughly.

"Now beat it. Get out of here. And stay out. You come around this station again and you'll wish you'd never been born."

The boy stood as stiff and silent as if he'd been made of marble. His lower lip had stopped its jumping. He was staring at Dan in unbelief.

Plainly he was stunned, mystified. He knew nothing of the hearing and its threat to Dan's future and of Dan's bitterness because of it.

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His hand came up and caught at a red stocking cap that had slipped askew on his curly brown hair.

Dan turned on his heel and went back into the station. He was cursing under his breath angrily, his stocky body tense.

Then, halfway across the floor, he halted. Suddenly his curses died. What was the matter with him anyway? The kid hadn't meant any harm. He had been trying to help. He had seen the firebug, too, and was chasing him.

For two minutes Dan stood, his thoughts welling. The kid a fireman? Sure. That was easily understood. He, Dan, had wanted to be a fireman too, even when he was younger than this boy.

And now what had he done? He had kicked this kid out, slapped him, told him he'd never be a fireman. It might have been himself, thirty years ago, that he had slapped.

He ran to the door and through it. Outside, the street was empty under the dry, crisp, clear night. He peered down all the streets that led away from the corner intersection. They were deserted. He cupped his hands and called.

"Richie! Richie! Richie Leffingwell! Come back here! Come on back, kid!"

He waited minutes, still peering. There was no answer.

. . . The next morning Dan called to see Chief Loughran. He told the chief he wanted to be relieved temporarily from station duty.

"I'm the only man who's really seen this ape, sir. I want to get out and look for him."

Loughran nodded. "I thought of that, too, Captain. I'm glad you've volunteered."

He got up and came over and put a hand on Dan's arm. "We've got to find this man, or somebody has. If he touches off another building or home or hospital it may mean the end of us all. You know what a shake-up can do.

"Now take your time and scout around. You know where: the places he's been and the places that are known fire traps in the district. Mostly, these bugs don't move very far. At that, it'll be like looking for the needle in the haystack."

NEEDLE? In the days that followed, Dan revised that. The search for the tall stranger with the flapping hat-brim and the loose shoulders was like trying to isolate a single drop of water in a cataract or an individual midge in a sunbeam. One tall man among hundreds of tall men. One flapping hat-brim among thousands in city crowds.

Dan read about pyromaniacs. If he was to be a detective this might help.

He learned that the movements of firebugs couldn't be forecast as were the movements of ordinary criminals. The pyros were insane; they were set in motion by obscure impulses unfathomed even by trained alienists.

They possessed but one behavior pattern which was consistent: they were fire-hypnotics. They had an uncontrollable lust to see roaring tongues of flame licking against night skies.

The craving for flame was in the nature of periodic attacks, usually sudden, yet afflicted persons had been known to make long and careful preparation for fires.

And all kinds of persons: a business man, successful and honored by day, had been discovered as a prowling pyro spreading terror by night; a housewife, the mother of children, had been taken in the act of applying the torch to a home containing children.

So Dan Croy knew that the hunt

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for the loose-jointed specter he had glimpsed the night of the Reagan burning could not be confined to a single social stratum nor to a single section of the city. The man might be physician or tramp, merchant or clerk, jail-bird or preacher.

Dan tried to find the Leffingwell boy, but gave up. Lacey was a long street and he had no exact address. No telephone was listed. He hadn't time for a continued search.

But he did canvass the district for other boys.

The fires at Acme Body, Intercity Blind, Reagan's Laundry and the lying-in hospital had broken out between dusk and midnight. Therefore, presumably, they had been witnessed by hordes of small-boy spectators.

Dan therefore spent days locating and interviewing urchins who had watched one or more of the four conflagrations. It was tiring, discouraging routine calling for great patience and greater diplomacy. Information imparted by the boys was either oververbose and irrelevant or timidly taciturn and monosyllabic.

Dan was in plain clothes so as to counteract juvenile fears of constituted, uniformed authority; and he sought to establish a comradely, familiar atmosphere for these interviews.

But he was too brusque, probably, to be a good diplomat; and the information he got was utterly valueless. Not one of a dozen lads he talked to had noticed the tall man nor anyone even sketchily fitting his description in the crowds at the fires.

Richie Leffingwell alone shared Dan's mental picture of the torch-man.

Dan attended most of the smaller fires which made up the city's average at this season. Those he could not cover were watched by insurance underwriters' operatives as well as by picked detective-bureau men to whom he had given the suspect's description as he knew it. He had hoped that the firebug would respond to the attraction of flame and mingle with the inevitable crowds which were always a part of every fire scene.

This, too, failed to produce results.

Ten days after the Reagan burning, Dan admitted to Chief Loughran that he was precisely at the point where he had begun. The thin man had vanished. A dozen or so of his kind had gone through police hands and been freed. The underwriter investigators confessed themselves baffled.

Bureau detectives, urged on by the mayor, had little by little relaxed their vigilance. Neither newspapers nor petitioning taxpayers could drive them further.

"The mayor's called a meeting of the trial board," the old chief said dismally. "Three deputies, myself, and members of the commission. You're to testify again."

DAN came back to the engine-house, his mind dark with discouragement. This new hearing would give the mayor his chance to invoke serious charges; and public sentiment would blame firemen for not catching a firebug running from a burning building.

And it was his own fault. If he hadn't lost his head when the Leffingwell boy tripped him, he could have caught the pyro. Dan was a sprinter, once a champion on the departmental track team. He could have caught the fellow. But he hadn't.

He had made another mistake, also, in not calling a cop at the first glimpse of the tall man.

At the station he went to the bunk-room. Dejectedly, he sat down and

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opened a newspaper. But before he had read a line the telephone in the dormitory rang. He jumped to answer.

It was Richie Leffingwell; and the lad's voice was taut with trouble.

Dan had no time for surprise. For Richie was stuttering in his ear: "I saw him! I saw him!"

Dan got a grip on himself. "The tall guy? Where?" He held his voice calm with tremendous effort. He knew instantly what Richie meant.

"A block away from where I live."

The words came tumbling. Dan could scarcely understand them.

"Take it easy now," he said kindly. "Take it easy, Richie. Just tell it slow. What was he doing? Where did he go?"

"He was carryin' something in a can, one of these coal-oil cans people use who've got stoves. He was in an awful hurry. I followed him. I followed him, Captain!"

"Where to?"

"You know that old hotel on Court Street. There!"

"You mean he went in?"

"Yes sir. He's in there now."

"How long ago was this, Richie?"

"Just now. Five minutes."

Dan knew the hotel. It was in this district, only three blocks away. He had inspected it more than once in the past.

It was three stories high, wood frame, brick veneer. Partitions of wood studding covered with wall board and sheet tin.

Under state regulations the place was classed as a lodging house, but it had been vacant many months. Forty rooms. Stairs front and rear. Wood. A wood laundry chute.

After one inspection he had ordered walls of the front stairway covered with cement plaster. The rest of it would burn like dry leaves. It was a fire-trap. . . .

Other fragments of remembered facts shot through his mind on the instant. He stood quite still, holding the receiver against his ear, figuring it out. Then he asked softly:

"Where are you?"

"In Green's drug store, down the street," Richie said.

"All right. Now go and wait for me across from this place. Understand? Keep out of sight."

"Yes sir."

HE PARKED half a block from the old hotel and was off along the dark street on the opposite side. Approaching the vacant building, he was glad he had said nothing about this at the station.

Young Richie might be mistaken. A tall man carrying a kerosene can might have a perfect right to do so, even if such a man entered a deserted hotel. Perhaps a tall man lived there, cooked there. It was the sort of place wherein a certain class of men might do light housekeeping.

He came even with the hotel and stopped. He waited, then called softly. There were trees on the curb-sward along here and he watched them, expecting Richie to step out from behind one. He saw nothing, heard nothing.

He called again, mildly resentful. He wondered whether this might be a build-up of the kid's, trying to square himself; whether the boy was afraid to face him.

Well, he couldn't wait, couldn't take chances. He'd have to see. A false alarm wouldn't help his reputation. In the event of a real one, there was an alarm-box handy on the next corner.

He crossed the street.

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There was a two-car garage at the back. Between this and the main building a gigantic, half-dead tree reared from the flat, dusty yard. Dan made for the shadow of the garage and from there moved quickly in, keeping the tree-trunk between himself and the door. It was the cellar door, yawning open as he had known it would.

He entered, feeling for steps. At the bottom of the black abyss he pushed on a rickety screen and went in.

For a minute he stood perfectly still, listening, breathing softly the dank air in the basement. If the thin man was actually firing the building he would begin low, probably on the first floor; and he would be moving about.

During that minute he heard nothing. Then he sniffed. A gossamer odor reached him. Gasoline! In his nostrils the scent was hideously familiar.

He snatched a flashlight from his pocket and, cupping it, painted the cemented walls of the basement with a finger of dim radiance.

In one corner stood a rusty and dilapidated steam boiler, surmounted by tentacles of pipe from which asbestos covering had fallen away to become half hidden in a mass of blackened cobwebs.

In the opposite corner a flight of wooden stairs led up to a skeleton landing. Beneath the stairs was a pile of debris—discarded boxes, pieces of wood, bundled newspapers. Dan made for it.

Halfway there he stopped in his tracks. Into the beam of his flashlight as it swept along the floor an object had jumped. It was something red and crumpled and it lay there pitifully inert and instantly eloquent.

It was Richie's stocking cap.

Dan picked it up and straightened slowly. Then he turned and ran for the stairs.

He was part way to the landing when he heard the sound of footsteps running. They seemed to be steps upon a stairway. Dan choked a cry in his throat. He almost shouted, "Richie!" But instead he moved swiftly upward.

He had known, too, that this door would be open. Cunning firebugs knew how to establish drafts. This one was more than cunning. He had opened the outer basement door as well as this inner one. Flame on the first floor would be fed with a current of fresh air.

Dan stood momentarily trying to think, trying to reason about Richie. The boy was inside the building. He had entered, probably, alone. Dan knew why. The crazy kid was trying to redeem himself; but—Lord! Why had he lost his cap? Had the pyro got him? Had—

Dan froze and pressed into the cranny of the door. Again he had caught the patter of feet; and this time there was no doubt that they came from the front stairway. Someone was coming down, running.

Dan gripped his flashlight for use as a bludgeon. He thrust his head warily around the frame of the door. He would catch the guy now, sure. His own presence here certainly was unsuspected.

BUT the answer to this was flame. The fire burst out with a rapidity that surprised him. Concentrating upon the footsteps, which, for the moment, he had lost, he stepped into the darkness of the kitchen, crouching and peering.

Instantly, as if it had been timed to his arrival, there was a flash, followed by a murmuring crackle.

Through an arched opening which connected this room with the next, Dan saw a figure leap backward. In this

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perspective the appearance of that figure was grotesquely familiar. Wide, loose shoulders, fluttery hands, flapping hat-brim, a cat-like agility of motion as the thin man sprang back from the up-leaping fire.

Dan moved toward him on the balls of his feet. He was hoping the fellow would not turn.

Beyond him the fire was running like a thing alive across the floor, following a close-laid trail of gas-wetted newspapers, rags and bits of wood. It ran through another door into a front room.

That room, Dan recalled, was adjacent to the hall. In the hall the first flight of stairs led up, only their sealed undersides coated with cement plaster —and for the rest unprotected wood.

Dan dodged to the right-hand side of the arch, then, gripping his flashlight, charged through.

He was almost to the thin man when the fellow heard him and whirled. Dan struck, but the long arms, flailing, fended the blow.

The firebug's long, livid face contorted. He screamed a high, rending *"Ah-h-h-h-h!"* His arms began wild, windmill revolutions and he jumped from side to side in a fantastic, aimless dance.

He continued to scream, while Dan crouched, out of reach of the inaccurate but dangerous swings, watching a chance to connect with a blow to the lunatic's skull. He was fascinated momentarily by the ridiculously tragic resistance of this counter-attack.

For perhaps half a minute the insane tableau lasted. The firebug, yelling meaningless incoherencies, tried to flank Dan. Dan, keeping out of range of those swinging arms, moved with him, heading him off.

He saw that the other's defense was not without cunning. The thin man was circling slowly with his hands flying like white birds. He was trying to reach the basement door. This had been his planned means of escape and now he was trying to use it in a concerted, single-tracked effort.

Dan suddenly shouted: "Where's that boy?"

The firebug stiffened, motionless for one instant, and lifted an arm. "Up there!" he screamed. "Up there!"

Dan, disgusted with this foolish travesty of battle, thinking of how he could close with his opponent, didn't understand at once. As the man spoke, he rushed. As he did so, he heard the whine of car brakes in the street outside. A passing driver had seen the fire.

His fist caught the firebug's shoulder. The fellow staggered but did not fall. Dan lunged to the right to head off an expected counter-rush past him.

It was then that he realized the meaning of the words he had heard. At the same moment the firebug turned and fled toward the front hall, with Dan behind him.

"Richie! Richie!" he called, even as he saw for the first time that the fire had taken serious hold.

The place was saturated with gasoline. The room next the hall was partially filled with a mass of solid blue flame. The middle room, in which they had been struggling, was less hot. It apparently had been used only as a point of origin of the fire trailer.

The thin man sped through the front room, skirting flame, and through the door into the hall. He was running for the front door. But as he approached it the blare of auto horns struck up a raucous chorus from outside. Without stopping, the firebug swerved and raced toward the rear. Dan stopped.

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RICHIE! The boy was trapped up there somewhere beyond the stairs. On the stairs the fire was going up, following a continuation of the well-laid trail of combustibles.

It had been fixed so as to race through the building from bottom to top, guided by the blazing fuse of paper, rags and gasoline and constantly fed by tributary lines of the same materials scattered along its path.

As it burned, it would destroy itself and the evidence it contained. It would destroy all but odors and odors were only circumstantial evidence.

Dan dropped to his knees, for the hall was growing hot. Lifting his head but shielding his face with an arm, he shouted again. "Richie! Richie!"

Now came the sound of a siren. It was the siren on engine 7. The alarm was in.

But that was the only sound that came to Dan aside from the crackling of the growing fire around him. He turned, and plunged along the hall toward the rear stairway. Richie would be on one of the upper floors; maybe— But Dan did not finish this thought.

Instead, he stopped in his tracks, whirled about and came back. Let the firebug go. If he got away, he got away. There was the kid up there.

In a flash it came to him complete, what he must do.

The front stairs were hidden in flame but Dan went up them two at a time, three at a time, praying that it wasn't solid fire as yet, that it hadn't eaten a firm hold in the wood, that so far only the combustible trail was burning.

In a measure, this was true. Otherwise, he wouldn't have got through to the first floor. For he was running through licking red-blue tongues that reached to his waist.

In this hall it was a little safer, not quite so much fire. But enough; too much. He crouched and trotted clumsily the length of it, calling as he moved, in the hope that Richie would answer. Thin smoke was in his face and nostrils and the heat was rising by the second.

At the end he began opening doors to rooms. One, two, three, he entered, circling them at a running pace, jerking open doors of closets. The rooms were cooler. There was no fire in any of them as yet.

He knew subconsciously that help would come soon, that engine 7 had rolled and would be in front of this building within three minutes. Yet when he heard the screaming of more sirens and the muted clatter of apparatus in the street, he was scarcely aware of it. A second, perhaps a third alarm had gone in. Hoses were unreeling.

In the hall again, he dropped to his hands and knees. He was calling almost continuously now, not with hope but as a necessary reflex. The legs of his trousers grew hot against his skin and his face felt stiff from the heat.

The fire on the stairway had spread. It had caught the thin railings and set them blazing.

Dan crawled swiftly, keeping close to the wall, as far away from the scorching fingers as he could. There was one more room, the front one. Its door was open. Reaching it, he saw the boy.

RICHIE was lying on his side and he was tied to a chair with a long strip of cloth, tightly rolled to form a rope. He had been struggling, for the chair, too, had tipped over.

His eyes were open and he was conscious but he was very still. He saw Dan but seemed not to recognize him. There was a bonfire in a corner of

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the room beyond him. It was a separate touch-off.

Dan came staggering in. The air here was painfully and dangerously hot. He picked up the chair and the boy together, without trying to unfasten the knotted rope of rags. He carried them out into the hall, past the flames and toward the rear.

Here he stopped, half falling, and began to drag chair and boy along the floor. He reached the rear room.

As he did so a deep sigh seemed to run through the entire building. There was an infinitesimal quake and a soughing murmur.

The sound of the explosion followed at once. From the basement. Floors buckled and plaster fell in chunks.

Dan was sent reeling against a wall. Perspiration was drying hard upon his face. The smell of gasoline came welling up the rear staircase.

The firebug *had* been crafty. He had set a time fuse of some sort in the basement—probably under that pile of debris—and the fuse had reached its end. Now there was flame, hot and alive, licking at the floors from below.

Smoke welled at him from all directions, choking his lungs.

Dan left the boy as he caught the sound of shattering glass at the front. Again he entered the hall and crept as far as he could toward the front stairs which now whistled and creaked under solid fire. More glass crashed. He cupped his hands and shouted:

"Don't open! Don't open! Look for an outdraft! Outdraft!"

From below came a yell. "Captain! Where are you?" It was one of the men from engine 7.

"Inside," Dan called. "Bring your lines through the side window at the front."

He heard Blaine answer, but the harm had been done. Glass in the front door was smashed.

Dan first felt the rush of air past his face as the hot gasses pushed outward under pressure. There was a renewed raging of flame on the stairway. The fire was feeling a down-draft which would presently change and go up.

He turned once more and made for the rear. As he bent over Richie, a window rattled and he saw the tip of a ladder touching the side of the sash. The helmet of a fireman lifted over the sill in the blue-white light outside.

Dan felt a sense of intense relief. He rushed to open the window. The ladderman's eyes met his, staring.

"Cap—"

"Williams! Wait!" Dan turned. He picked up the chair and the boy in his arms, reeled with them to the window. He thrust them through. Williams stepped down a foot or so and caught the burden on his shoulder.

"Go down. Can you?"

"Yes. I can make it. But you, too, Captain. You're—"

Williams was powerful and he had the boy and the chair securely balanced. He was moving.

"I'll make it," Dan said, for Williams was watching him anxiously.

He threw one leg over the sill. He could hear the roar of flames inside the rear stairway. Evidently the entire building was now involved, because of the explosion in the basement. That would mean that only these three rooms on the second floor were free of fire.

Dan waited until Williams was nearly down. Outside, in the yard, they were dragging hose. They would attack, of course, from both front and back. Within another two minutes, water would be drenching the entire building. Part of it, at least, would be saved.

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DAN was on the sill with both feet over when he heard the scream. It came from below, from the lower rear stairway or even farther down.

He couldn't localize it precisely. His senses were not exactly sharp. He felt oddly tired and it was hard to breathe deeply. His body, under his clothing, was hot; and his eyeballs smarted painfully.

Yet he understood at once. It was the firebug; the fellow hadn't gotten out.

Dan put one foot on the ladder. The rat. Let him burn. If ever a man deserved it, he did. Besides, the hoses would begin in a minute and that would knock fire from around him.

Dan started down. Below in the yard he could see the faces of firemen lifted toward him in fleeting glances as the owners of the faces worked. He heard the voice of a battalion chief and he thought he heard Chief Loughran giving a command, farther off, in the side yard.

But the scream didn't come again. It was not repeated.

The roar and crackle of the flames, the sounds from the street dwindled to a sort of silence as Dan's ears strained to catch a repetition of the sharp and horrible cry.

Dan stopped. Through the fire-laden rooms came the sound of more glass shattering from in front. Hose lines would be charged within seconds.

He started back up. There was a queer vague thought in his mind. He came in at the window. A fireman below shouted up at him but he paid no heed.

This fellow, the firebug, had earned death. He had murdered a woman in the Intercity burning. He had been the cause of serious injuries to two firemen and the death of a third. He had been responsible for thousands of dollars' worth of property damage. And all on account of his lust for flame.

Dan was inside the hot rear room moving toward the stairway from whence the cry had come. Lust, yes. Insane lust. The thin man was insane, was not responsible. He was a moth, an automaton, a worshiper of fire. He was a child. You, if you were civilized, protected children and madmen.

Dan felt this; he did not think it out clearly; or if he did, it was not with words. . . .

He was on the rear stairway which, so far, was not involved. He felt his way step by step through the dark. He was responding to a sense that was nearer than any abstraction; a sense of duty, perhaps only a sense of habit.

What he knew well was that here was a creature trapped by fire and that he had to go find him. That was a fireman's job.

In the first two flights the stairway was fairly clear. It was hot but as yet there was no flame and only a haze of smoke. Most of the blaze was still at the front.

But the heat was searing.

Halfway down the lower flight, this changed. The walls of the narrow inclosure were crackling. The heat was almost unbearable. Below the last step there was a space of flooring and beyond this the door.

The wood holding the latch fell away as Dan pushed. The door opened and smoke flooded through into his face. Wood and gasoline smoke, scorching hot, it half blinded him.

"Hi!"

He called hoarsely and the sound seemed caught and hushed and flung back into his throat. The smoke was reddish in color, from flame, here in the kitchen. Again he shouted, hoping

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the firebug was capable of making himself heard.

He couldn't see ten inches but he could hear the bellowing of fire at the front and the noise of the water thudding against hollows in walls and floors.

Above this, he suddenly heard a groan. He dropped to hands and knees and crawled toward the sound. It was on the other side of the kitchen, toward the arched doorway. Just now the arch was terribly limned with leaping, writhing flames. In the middle room there was a roaring furnace.

He came up from his knees. The floor was burning them. The palms of his hands itched painfully. He went a little farther, crouching, with the soles of his feet in torture.

Then, under the high-legged, old-fashioned gas stove he saw what appeared to be a bundle of rags.

He writhed toward it, touched it. The bundle twitched, moaned and gave a thin shriek that was like the whine of a puppy. He pulled it out and lifted it in his arms and staggered with it to the stairway. He started up.

HE REMEMBERED afterward hearing Williams shout from above him. He even remembered falling on the stairs, and the little scream let out by the firebug.

He felt hands on him and he heard the tumult as they brought him down. He sucked deeply of the fresh air. He saw the rim of darkness circling the fire-lighted area back of the burning hotel. He felt other hands lifting.

And he knew, or thought he knew, one of the men of the ambulance crew.

Then all at once he saw a face, small, round and white.

"Hello, Richie," he said. "Okay?"

The white face nodded.

"You bet, Captain."

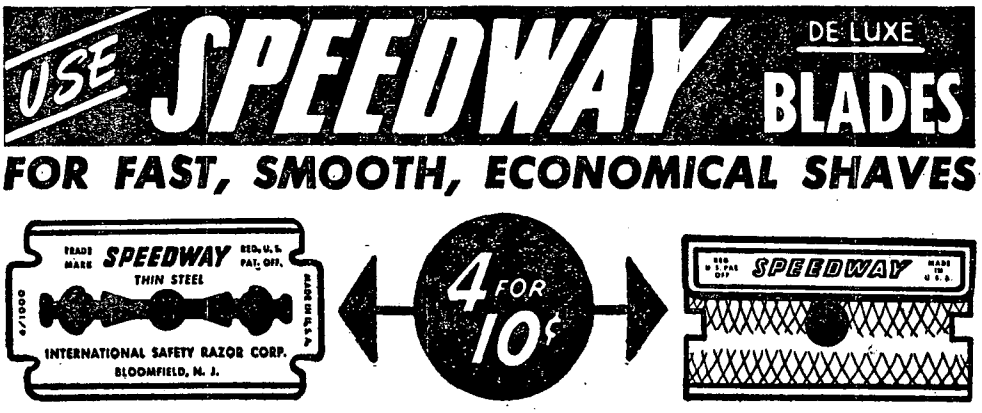
He was lifted higher, pushed gently into a dark cove. It was wonderfully cool inside the ambulance. A new face and a new voice came close.

"You'll be all right, Captain. Don't worry. Just smoke and a little scorching."

"Chief!" Dan blurted. "That was the guy . . . Crazy. Crazy as a loon—"

"I know." Loughran's gnarled hand rested lightly over Dan's lips. "Take it easy. Tell it later."

But Dan's lips twisted free. "Chief," he whispered; and when the white head bent: "Tell the kid, Richie—Richie Leffingwell—to drop in at the station tomorrow after school. As usual, tell him. As usual."



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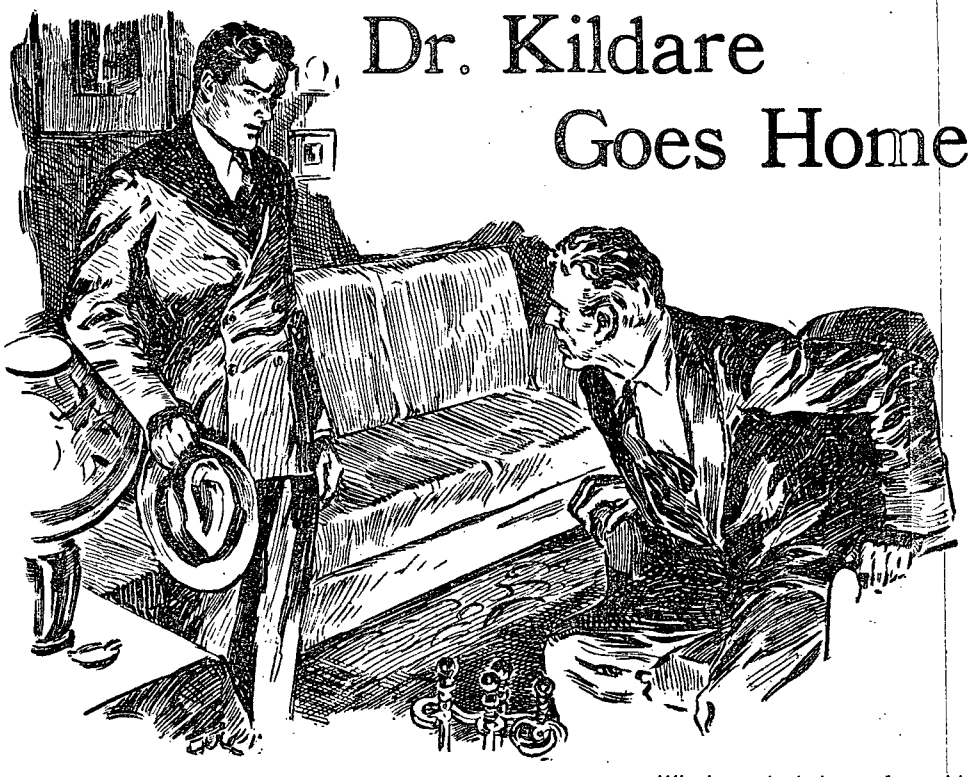
Dr. Kildare Goes Home



Winslow started up from his chair when he saw Kildare. He was on the verge of an angry outburst, but controlled himself

By MAX BRAND

DR. JIMMY KILDARE has worked desperately to save two fine young lives: those of WILLIAM CAREW, son of the hospital superintendent, and MARGUERITE PASTON, his sweetheart, who have decided to commit suicide because their love seems hopeless.

Persuaded by young Kildare, they make an appointment with the father, DR. WILLIAM CAREW; and he, too overburdened with hospital work to understand their problem, refuses to hear of their marriage until the boy is out of college.

Crushed by this decision, William and Marguerite feel that there is no point in continuing to live. They write a note of thanks and farewell to Kildare, leaving it with NURSE MARY LAMONT, the doctor's devoted—and often neglected—assistant and friend.

But Kildare, the only man who can save them, is too busy now even to read the note: for he has already dedicated himself to saving an entire town.

ON CHRISTMAS EVE he and DR. LEONARD GILLESPIE, the great diagnostician whom he assists, went to spend the holiday at the Kildare family home in Dartford. Welcomed by his mother, Jimmy failed even to notice BEATRICE RAYMOND, his old sweetheart.

For his father, DR. STEPHEN KILDARE, fine old country practitioner, had been called to the neighboring town of Medwick, where for two days he had been the only doctor. Learning this, Jimmy left immediately for Medwick—and did not return.

At last Dr. Gillespie himself—confined though he was to a wheel chair—had ambu-

This story began in the Argosy for June 1

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lance driver JOE WEYMAN take him to find the two Kildares. They were in a kitchen in the Lancey house operating on a woman. Old Dr. Kildare was exhausted, and Dr. Gillespie took over to assist Jimmy.

MEDWICK, a dying factory town without the services of a regular doctor, presented a problem and a challenge to young Kildare. With the help of his father and of Dr. Gillespie, he presented a plan to GEOFFREY WINSLOW, banker and leading citizen of the town, and obtained his reluctant promise of coöperation.

Like Geoffrey Winslow, the Medwick people are set and independent, typical New Englanders; and Jimmy Kildare knows how deeply they will distrust youth and unfamiliar methods. But he is determined somehow to break his way through the granite wall of their conservatism.

Thus on Christmas day young Kildare is again in his own office, so feverish with plans that he does not even finish opening a gift that Mary Lamont has lovingly wrapped for him. He does not notice her tears as he leaves. . . .

He goes directly to see a number of doctors he knows: MARTIN "MIDGE" WHALEN, pediatrist; BEN CONNOR, gynecologist; SIDNEY GARFIELD, dentist; and SAMMY DARNELL, general surgeon. All competent, eager young men—and all broke, without prospects. They jump at the chance to go to Medwick and form a clinic there.

AT LAST young Kildare is ready to call on his two most courageous, most impoverished friends. DR. JACK DAVISON, a laboratory technician in the hospital, is trying to maintain a home on a mere pittance. His wife, JOAN, soon to become a mother, is in need of a change of air, rest, better food.

Kildare finds a Christmas wreath on the door of their single sparsely-furnished room, but no Christmas cheer inside. He persuades Davison to join the Medwick clinic as laboratory man and internalist—though Davison is fearful of giving up his job at the hospital.

And Jimmy Kildare, even as he reassures Jack and Joan, is faced with an opening abyss of dread. He is carrying six persons on his shoulders; and at least one of those persons might never survive a fall. Are the Kildare shoulders big enough for that?

Meanwhile, forgotten now by the doc who alone understands them, William Carew and Marguerite Paston set their young faces resolutely toward death. . . .

CHAPTER X

GOOD DOCTORS ARE BEGGARS

BACK in the hospital, Kildare gave to Gillespie the list of his chosen men—those five young doctors willing to take a long shot on the town of Medwick.

"Why show the names to me?" demanded Gillespie. "They're your men, not mine. Old men don't know young ones. We guess about you, but we never really know.

"You're like people in story-books. So go ahead with your gang. They'll take the glory, and you'll take the kicks in the face; and so, pretty soon, you'll be a little older."

"We'll need medical supplies and a lot of them," said Kildare.

"Go beg them from Walter Carew," said Gillespie. "That's something that a doctor has to be. He has to be a beggar. He has to beg to have his bill paid today; and tomorrow he has to beg rich blighters to help his charity patients. So learn how to get down and humble yourself without knee pads. Go beg from Carew!"

Kildare stared at him.

"You think I'm unfair?" roared Gillespie suddenly. "What the devil will you do when you have to handle this whole office unless you know how to work Carew—or somebody a damned sight harder?"

Kildare went up to see Carew. He was admitted at once.

"Merry Christmas," said Carew. "Now run along, Kildare. I'm busy. Come back another day."

"Another day will be too late," said Kildare.

"For what?" asked Carew.

"For an ambulance load of drugs and medicines and all sorts of supplies that are needed in Medwick."

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"An ambulance load? What's Medwick to me or me to Medwick? Am I the state dispensary? What made you think the hospital would give out like this?"

"I thought that it was Christmas," said Kildare.

"Did you? Did Gillespie send you here on a fool's errand of this sort?"

"You seemed the only person to turn to," said Kildare.

"Did Gillespie send you here?"

"You understand, Doctor Carew, that I wouldn't come to you except in a great emergency."

"YOU'RE covering up Gillespie, are you?" demanded Carew. He stopped glowering and leaned suddenly back in his chair. "I wonder who'd cover up old Carew if *he* did something foolish? Who'd take the rap for *me?* . . .

"Well, make out your list and perhaps I'll look it over one of these days."

"I have the list here, sir."

"You have the list there, have you? Let me see it. Good Lord, Kildare, there's a thousand dollars worth of stuff on this list. There's more than that. It's entirely irregular. I'd be held to account. I can't do it. Sorry, but I can't do it."

"No, sir," said Kildare.

"It can't be expected of me."

"No, sir," said Kildare.

"I can't be expected to play Santa Claus all over the place, can I?"

"No, sir," said Kildare.

"Then why don't you get out and leave me in peace?"

"Because I hope you'll talk yourself into the Christmas spirit, sir."

"You have in infernal, assured, brazen way about you," said Carew. "You seem to think that you're always right. Part of the time I suppose you are. Well, here's my okay on the thing. Take it away."

He returned the list to Kildare with his signature added to it.

"This means a lot to a great many people," said Kildare. "Thank you, sir."

"Let other people do the thanking—and let them thank your infernal stubbornness. . . . How is Gillespie?"

"Better than he was last week."

"He bears up," murmured Carew. "God bless him, the man's body may be eaten away, but his spirit endures. There's no consuming that."

"When you see your son, give him my regards, sir."

"What do you think of that lad?"

"I think he's a fine fellow. He's different from the rest of us," said Kildare, looking hard at Carew, "but I hope he'll find a lot of happiness."

"He'll find it," stated Carew. "I've made a good many mistakes about that boy, but I'm on the right line with him, at last."

"I'm glad of that, sir," said Kildare, immensely relieved.

"Sometimes we waste a great deal of time before we know our own; but I know William, now, and he'll be on a good footing with me and with life from now on."

Kildare went from the office with his head high, and there was a song that worked mutely in his throat.

LATE that night he had the ambulance-load of materials deposited in the Lancey house. Old Mrs. Lancey, helpless with rheumatism in her bedroom, freely donated the rest of her old house, together with the long dairy-shed behind it, to the uses of the doctors.

The whole thing split up into domains. There was even an end room of the dairy-shed in which Jack Davison was setting up the first elements of a small laboratory. All night they worked putting their affairs in order.

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In the early morning, Geoffrey Winslow visited the house and walked through all the arrangements. Old Stephen Kildare and his son walked anxiously beside the chief power and mind of Medwick.

There were not many questions. Winslow seemed to prefer to do his own looking and draw his own deductions in silence. He was introduced to all of the young doctors and gave them all a brief, hard grip of the hand, and a grave scanning.

Afterward he said to Stephen Kildare: "I like to see a small seed planted and then watch it grow. But here there's a whole tree transplanted, from the taproot to the top bough. . . . I hope Medwick is the right sort of soil to nurture it."

"You've broken the ground for us," said James Kildare. "You've put yourself behind us and that ought to be enough if these doctors can work the way I know they want to work."

"I hope for the best," said Winslow, his grim face never relaxing. "I can't help noticing that your child specialist looks like a prizefighter and your obstetrician looks like a longshoreman and your general surgeon acts like a tap dancer or a gigolo, but still I hope for the best. I know you've picked out the right people as nearly as you can, Dr. Kildare."

Stephen Kildare said: "The actual selections were made by my son, Mr. Winslow."

Winslow was stopped and hard hit by this announcement.

"This young man?" he exclaimed. "Did *he* do the choosing?"

"You know, Mr. Winslow," said the old doctor, "that my time is spent chiefly in the country. I don't have an opportunity to rub elbows with the youngsters who are coming up in medicine. So of course I left the choosing to my son. He has an instinct for the right man."

Winslow surveyed young Kildare with his customary air of cold reservation.

"There's a financial aspect to this," he said, leaving his mind on the last subject unspoken. "I've designed a way in which Medwick, no matter how poor the people are, can afford to secure proper medical services from such a group as these young doctors form.

"There are three thousand people in the town. At ten cents per week per head, that would give us fifteen thousand dollars a year. And that ought to pay small salaries to the five doctors as well as pay for medicines.

"Hospitalization would be another thing to think about. We could perhaps pay two thousand a year to each of the doctors and leave the margin for medical supplies."

Stephen Kildare said, reflectively: "After twenty-three or four years of special education, a man must content himself with an income of two thousand a year? Thirty or forty dollars a week, when ordinary labor . . ."

He broke off.

Jimmy Kildare said: "None of them expects to get rich. They want a chance to make a beginning."

Winslow remained coldly formal. He said: "It will be necessary to hold a town meeting and discuss this business in a few days. By that time, Medwick will have had a chance to see the new doctors at work.

"If the town is favorably impressed, I've no doubt that the meeting will vote to assess each head in the town at the rate I've suggested. The matter is now in the hands of your associates, Dr. Kildare. They will have to prove or disprove themselves in the interim."

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With this, he left the Kildares abruptly and walked out of the house.

"He's a hard man, but he's just," said Stephen Kildare.

"Something has worn him out," said Jimmy.

"His cares and worries about the town," suggested Stephen Kildare.

"It's more than that," answered Jimmy, and shook his head. "Will you go home, now, and go to bed?"

"Wouldn't it be better for me to stay here until your friends have made their start?"

"No. They have to make or break themselves. You can't hold people like them on leading strings."

"Then I'm going home," said the father, "to sleep, and sleep, and sleep!"

KILDARE went up to Joan Davison and found her still tidying up her room. At this moment she was putting Davison's diplomas on the wall.

Against the window the rain struck heavily aslant and darkened the room to the shade and almost to the texture of a charcoal drawing.

Joan bloomed in the dimness. She hardly could speak without laughter.

"It's like the beginning of everything. It's like the first day of life," she said. "This is where Jack starts to show the world what he is!"

"It's not all settled," Kildare warned her, and he kept the grim face of Winslow always in mind. "We have to go along slowly but in the end the thing will go through. These are pretty stubborn people, Joan."

"Don't they want to be helped?" she asked.

"They want to be helped—in the ways they're accustomed to. I've tried to warn the boys to go slowly. But I'm only an interne, Joan, and they're all my superior officers. I have to talk small."

"Superior officers? Superior to *you*, Jimmy?" She laughed at him.

He said soberly: "If things should begin to go badly, in your estimation, I want you to telephone to me. Nobody else will. Promise me that you'll do it?"

"Of course I will. But where's the danger?"

"They may try to give Medwick many good things in a rush instead of one by one. But if a pinch comes, perhaps I can be of help."

"Of course they'll shout for you if there's trouble!"

"Doctors never shout for internes. I'll depend on you to let me know, Joan."

"I'll keep a whole diary for you," she said.

"You keep yourself," said Kildare.

CHAPTER XI

A TOWN BEWITCHED

TWO days later Mrs. Anthony Cabot and Mrs. Peter Devlin came through the Medwick rain to call on Geoffrey Winslow. He received them not in a living room but in a parlor; for Winslow was proud of the virtues of his ancestors and approved all their ways of living, even down to their "Sunday" room.

"It's my well, Mr. Winslow!" said Mrs. Peter Devlin, fat and busy. "You know the water of that well?"

"Everyone knows it," said Winslow. "Has something fallen in?"

"You remember the day you were talking with Peter ten years ago about money for the new barn and it was hot and you wanted a glass of water and you said it was the finest water you'd ever tasted?"

"Everyone knows it's the finest water in the town," said Winslow. "Sit down, please."

Mrs. Cabot sat down but Mrs. Peter

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Devlin was bursting with indignation.

"*You* may know, Mr. Winslow, but what you know," she said, "isn't good enough for *some* people, with their crazy, new-fangled ideas! It's not good enough for those new, baby-faced boys who call themselves doctors!"

"I've been hearing about them," said Winslow. "What's up now?"

"You wouldn't believe it," said she. "It's just too much to be believed, but one of them ordered me to seal that well. He didn't ask. He ordered!"

"You didn't make them constables, Mr. Winslow, I hope?" asked Mrs. Anthony Cabot.

"I made them nothing," he answered with firmness. "Who was this one and what were his reasons?"

"This is the one called Whalen."

"The fellow who looks like a prize-fighter?"

"That's the man! How could he be a doctor—how could he, above all, be a *child* specialist? Oh, Mr. Winslow, he showed me some stuff in little glass tubes and talked about germs and said that my Susie Anne and all the Wheeler children were sick from drinking the water of that well; and he said that he directed me to seal that well immediately.

"And Mr. Winslow, if I close that well I'll have to pipe in town water and we haven't any money and Peter's been out of work so long."

"Have you closed the well?" asked the calm voice of Winslow.

"No, sir. I haven't closed it yet."

"Then I wouldn't," said Winslow.

"Thank you, Mr. Winslow. I just knew what you would say!"

"And what trouble have you been having, Mrs. Cabot?"

"It turns out my hams and bacons are no good," said Mrs. Cabot, crisply.

"We have one of your sides of bacon in the house right now," said Winslow. "I never tasted better bacon."

"No matter what you and the others think," said Mrs. Cabot. "The bacon has to be hauled out and burned. Even burning it wouldn't be safe enough. Young Davison, who called himself a doctor, says that it's no good. It's got to go."

"Why?" asked Winslow.

"Because there's something in it. It's nothing you can see. It's nothing you can smell. It's nothing you can taste. But it's dangerous.

"Ah? Dangerous?" murmured Winslow.

"He says so," declared Mrs. Cabot, disdainfully. "He says that probably Abe Jenkins' family and Cousin Harry Wharton's boys are sick from my bacon, and heaven knows how many else!"

"And why not I and my wife and everyone else who has eaten the bacon?" asked Winslow.

"I can't tell. Something about your people frying the bacon crisper, or some nonsense such as that. Mr. Winslow, he laid a death at my door! He dared to say that poor, sweet Annie McIvor must have died last year from eating meat from my smoke-house."

"I think that smoke-house," said Winslow, calmly, "has been working for two hundred years or more. Yes, more. It was built ten years after the house. That was in 1723. And in all that time I don't think anyone has pointed a wrong finger at the Cabots. I know Medwick, Mrs. Cabot, and I don't think anyone has pointed a wrong finger at the Cabots!"

Tears of pleasure stood up in the eyes of Mrs. Cabot. She could not speak until she had risen to go.

"So I won't bury it!" she exploded, then.

"I never like to see good food wasted," said Winslow. "What do these

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young doctors think they're about?"

"Why," said Mrs. Cabot, "I think they believe that our town is hexed!"

"Medwick? Bewitched? Our Medwick?"

Winslow, who almost never laughed, managed to smile.

"What's to be done about them?" demanded Mrs. Anthony Cabot.

"Why, there's a town meeting in a few days," said Winslow, "and then I should not be surprised if something were done about the doctors that would

life in his eye, and there's less of a ring in his voice, and his step is slower."

"Has he lost so much money?" asked Barbara, aghast.

"It's not the money that matters to him," said his wife. "But Medwick is his whole blood and bone. It gave him his fortune and he loves it. He knows all the people in it. He's loaned and fended and helped with advice, but now it seems to me that he's beginning to love the people less than the town.

"I think there's a little hardness and

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ray Allister and tell him that in my time I've grown used to men *paying* for the roofs over their heads."

There was a faint cry from Barbara. The heavy step of Winslow went on toward the rear of the house; and after a moment another footfall, pausing, timid, began to come back up the stairs.

Mrs. Winslow went suddenly out to the head of the steps and waited for the girl, but Barbara come up to her and passed as if she were not there. In the little sitting room again she stood in front of a window as if she were looking

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"I don't know, sir. It's just a matter of seeing what I could do."

"Or maybe," said Gillespie, "you've turned into a diplomat. Kind of an international diplomat. Going to stop being a doctor, perhaps, and cure people with tact. Is that it? Better send young Doctor Kildare over to St. James, so's he can wear short pants and talk to the king, eh? . . . What in tophet would you be doing over there in Medwick?"

"I don't know," repeated Kildare, "but sometimes there's a way of working things—if you put your muscle into

...meantime, Mrs. Winslow in ... upstairs sitting room, with the ...ound rag rug before the little hearth and the window curtains puffed and starched until they were as stiff as stone, was saying to her niece: "I wouldn't talk to him about it just now, Barbara."

"But I've always talked to Uncle Geoffrey about everything!" said Barbara. "And it's only such a tiny little bit of a thing to ask, after all. He doesn't use the Pinewood at all, does he?"

"No, he hasn't used it for two or three years. But he's not in a giving mood or even in a lending mood. Barbara darling," said Mrs. Winslow.

"Uncle Geoffrey," queried the girl. "Why, he's given and loaned all his life!"

"It's the dying of Medwick that's changed him," whispered Mrs. Winslow.

"Oh, but Medwick's not dying, is it?"

"Slowly dying, and sometimes I almost think that your Uncle Geoffrey is dying with it."

"Aunt Marian!"

"God forgive me if I'm drumming up trouble and crossing bridges before I come to them," said Mrs. Winslow, "but every day, it seems to me, there's less ...creepin... like bitter old age tha... before his time!"

"There he is now," said Barbara. "He's through with those women. I'm going down and ask him, this minute."

"Oh, Barbara, I wouldn't if I were you."

"Why not? Murray's as proud as steel. He wouldn't have let me come to ask for the Pinewood cottage if he'd thought that it was begging."

"It's not begging, darling, but . . . Barbara, please don't go!"

"Aunt Marian, I know Uncle Geoffrey. He's never said no to me in his life."

She hurried out of the room and ran down the stairs. Mrs. Winslow, breathlessly listening, clasped her hands together and bowed her head a little over them. Even in this moment of dread, she could not help noticing and adoring the lightness with which the girl's footfall went down the stairs.

Then she heard Barbara singing out: "Uncle Geoffrey, Murray and I wondered—if you're not using it—if we could have the Pinewood cottage for a couple of months?"

There was a pause, Mrs. Winslow closed her eyes and winced from the blow. Then the hard, dry voice of her husband was saying: "Go back to Mur-

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[redacted] although, in fact, [redacted] made the glass as opaque as dark, deep water.

CHAPTER XII

YOU WILL DIE . . .

THE voice of Joan Davison came over the telephone to Kildare thin and small, like that of a lost child: "Is it wrong to tell you that I'm afraid things are very bad, here, Jimmy? No one will talk to me. They're afraid that I'll find out something.

"But, Jimmy, no more patients are coming to the house. Hardly a one, and I know that Jack and the rest of them all are frightened . . . It's silly for me to bother you, Jimmy, only you told me to let you know."

"Has my father come back to Medwick?" asked Kildare.

"Yes, I saw him yesterday."

"Then it's time for me to get out there," said Kildare. "I'll come today."

". . . Medwick? You'll go back to Medwick? For what? And who'll let you go?" demanded Gillespie.

"They're having trouble with the town," said Kildare. "I thought that I might be useful to them some way."

"If five real doctors can't wangle the thing, how can an interne succeed?" you don't mind."

"Have you got a plan of [redacted]"

"No, sir."

"What do you intend doing?"

"I intend to talk to Mr. Winslow."

"Why Winslow?"

"Because if there's trouble, I imagine he's making it."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, sir. I've an instinct that he might make trouble."

"All right, Kildare. I know you. You want to get close and fire when you see the whites of their eyes."

"May I go, sir?"

"That's not the question. The question is when you'll return."

"It looks like a quick fight, and then a finish, one way or the other."

"Will you quit when you're beaten?"

"Beaten? I suppose so, sir."

"We'll have to see about that. Well, go along, go along! You're no good to me here when your heart's in another place!"

BEFORE Kildare reached Medwick, matters had progressed very far. Midge Whalen, looking more like a chunk of prizefighter than ever, stood in the center of the parlor of the Lancey cottage and stated the condition exactly.

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Connor, Darnell, and Sid Garfield sat deeply slouched in their chairs, looking at the pattern of the rug. Davison was upstairs with his wife.

"Joan is hard hit," said Whalen. "She tied her whole hope of the future to this business and now she's sunk. We're all hit pretty hard, but she's sunk without a trace, now that this Medwick business is a dead loss."

"You mean that there's not a ghost of hope?" asked Kildare.

"How can there be," demanded Whalen, "when the head man is set dead against us?"

"Winslow? I'll try to talk to him," said Kildare.

"You talked us into this mess, but you'll never be able to talk us out again," snarled Connor.

Whalen said, "Quit that, Ben!"

"All right. I'm sorry," said Connor. "That was just some of the black Irish coming out of me. Forget it, Jimmy, will you?"

Kildare waved a hand and shrugged his shoulders. He went upstairs to the Davisons. They were full of a sort of courteously smiling despair. They did not blame Kildare. They did not have to. Their silence was more than enough.

"What's happened?" asked Kildare. "I don't make much sense out of it, except that Winslow seems to be set against you."

"He's sent out word that we're a lot of young fools," said Davison. "He has the people in the town afraid to come to us because they'll be laughed at."

"What are his reasons?" asked Kildare.

"I don't know. All I know is that the townspeople talk behind our backs when we go down the street. We can stand that, all right; we could stand it if even a few of them would start coming to us for treatment.

"But the main thing is that there's the town meeting tomorrow to decide whether or not they should levy a poll tax in order to pay us; the way you said they would. And Winslow will sink us at the meeting."

Kildare stood by the window and tapped his fingertips against the cold glass. He was silent for a long moment.

"You see?" he heard the almost inaudible voice of Davison say behind him.

"He's not finished. He'll think out something to do," answered the whisper of Joan.

Kildare turned and looked at the girl. She made herself smile at him. She was white and very frightened; the telltale bruises of insomnia were around her eyes; but she attached some sort of a blind hope to Kildare.

"That's right, Joan," he said. "I'm going to find something to do. I'm going to try the first step now."

She began to weep. She fought so hard against giving way that the sobbing was deep and half strangled like that of a man unused to breaking down.

KILDARE left the Lancey house and went straight to the bank of Geoffrey Winslow. All that the sign announced was *Real Estate;* but there was a back room with a few old mahogany chairs and a roll-topped desk in it that served as the only bank the town of Medwick knew.

Kildare had to wait outside the door of clouded glass and he could not help hearing the raised tones of Winslow, saying: "You're not beaten in fact, Parker. You're only beaten in fancy, the way the whole town is beaten. You sit down and fold your hands . . ."

"No, sir," said a tremulous voice. "I've been all around. I've asked for work everywhere."

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"There's no use asking for work," said Winslow. "There's no use asking for it, in a time like this. This is the time to make work. That's why God gave you a brain. To create—to make something where there was nothing before.

"Go out and do that and don't come in here whining that you can't pay your interest. I'm not your grandfather. I've no paternal interest in you.

"The trouble is that I've treated the whole lot of you as though you were children; but now I'm going to make you be men. You have to stand on your own feet. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Parker.

"You can have till Monday to find that money, Parker," said Winslow. "That's all."

Chairs pushed back. Parker came out from the door with Winslow standing behind him. Parker's desperate face made Kildare think of a battle picture: men charging in a lost cause and knowing that they are about to fall.

Winslow said: "Ah, it's young Doctor Kildare. What can I do for you, young man?"

Parker, moving on, gradually slowed and then turned to listen. Behind the desks in the outer room, Winslow's two assistants were staring at Kildare and smiling a little. They seemed to anticipate what was to come.

"I'm afraid that you don't approve of the new doctors," said Kildare.

"Perhaps not, entirely," said Winslow. "You see, I'm an old-fashioned man, young Doctor Kildare, but I'm not so old that I believe in witchcraft."

Kildare waited. He could feel that doom was about to descend upon this medical experiment in Medwick, but there was something else that kept him staring at the banker: there was something in Winslow's face and something about the drag of his voice, no matter how loud it might be, that intrigued the diagnostician's instinct of Kildare.

He was reading in the man far more than he was hearing from him.

WINSLOW enlarged a little on his theme: "In the days of witchcraft the credulity of people was more elastic; but though I know that young men *must* get our attention, even if they have to scream at the top of their voices, I'm not quite prepared for it when they say that because several families become ill down by the river, John Heney's cow should be shot at the top of the hill!"

There was stifled laughter from the people in the background.

Kildare said: "But if Heney has been delivering milk and there is a disease appearing among his—"

"My lad," said Winslow, "I'm not a complete fool. I realize that there are such things as germs. Even in Medwick we read the newspapers—now and then. It isn't the cow on the hill alone.

"Take the case of Mrs. Finney's barn. Because a good many people have colds in the head in the western part of the town, it appears that your very young friends want to burn down Mrs. Finney's barn! She objects, I object; and I'm afraid that the barn shall not be burned."

"Mr. Winslow," said Kildare, "if the hay is a source of hay-fever and the barn itself is—"

"Is covered with witchcraft?" sneered Winslow. "But there are other things. Peter Devlin's well—the best water in town!—is to be stopped; the Cabots' fine sides of bacon are to be buried like a plague; and finally—God forgive us!—all milk is to be taken away from the Turner baby. He's to have what, instead? Why, young Doctor Kildare, he's to have bean-soup!"

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There was a sudden roar of laughter from the others though Winslow seemed not even tempted to smile.

Kildare said: "In certain cases soya beans must be used when . . ."

"Young man," said Winslow, "there is always an explanation for everything, if one cares to look far enough for it. But Medwick has had enough of the medical gymnastics of your friends. We don't want them here, Doctor Kildare. In fact, we don't intend to have them."

"I see how it is," said Kildare.

"What do you see?" asked Winslow.

"You've set the town solidly against us," said Kildare. "Through the whole of Medwick, perhaps one person in five needs medical attention. You have scores of chronic cases that either are incurable, now, or soon will be; but because sound doctors are telling you how to prevent disease at the same time that they attempt to cure it, you're going to throw them out of the place."

"No throwing, my friend," said Winslow. "We wouldn't waste that much effort on them."

"However, you won't oppose the doctors very long."

"Won't I? We have had witchcraft, and now we're to have prophecy, it seems?"

"Mr. Winslow, you've been finding it, recently, a little more of an effort to walk about; a chair is pretty welcome to you?"

"Why should a man stand when he can sit?" asked Winslow.

"There is a good deal of soreness in your mouth and around your tongue, isn't there?"

"Dr. Kildare, I have work to do. It isn't my practice, after all, to waste my time in mere gossip. I'll say goodbye to you."

"Wait a moment," said Kildare. "I wanted to tell you why you've lost your good nature, why there's that soreness in your mouth, why it's harder for you to get about, just the past few days—and why you won't interfere with the doctors very much longer."

"Ah, can you tell me that?" asked Winslow. "What is the answer, then?"

"You are about to die," said Kildare.

Winslow, narrowing his eyes, stared fixedly at Kildare. There was no more laughter in the room.

"If it seems like witchcraft to you," said Kildare, "I'm sorry. But your death may help to restore the reputation of the doctors. It may give Medwick a chance to fight intelligently for its health.

"I hate to choose a date so soon, but I'm afraid that Mr. Parker won't have to pay you that money on Monday. You won't be alive to receive it."

CHAPTER XIII

GREETING FROM MARY

"GONE?" repeated Mary Lamont. "Has Jimmy really gone, Doctor Gillespie?" Her voice was incredulous and a little hurt.

"This time he didn't say goodbye to you, eh? Yes, he's really gone. So far as I know, he's got his bulldog grip on another of his lost causes; and every time he locks his jaws that way, it may be the end of him. It may mean that he'll be dragged down to the bottom of the sea without letting go."

She went back into Kildare's office and stood at his desk with her fingers idling through a stack of reports, and unsorted cards which would have to go into the indices.

There was no end to this indexing, since the whole world of medicine, to young Kildare, was qualified in every item by the comments of the great Gillespie.

She grew infinitely weary of the name

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of Gillespie, at times; it salted the conversation of Kildare as verses from the Koran haunt the lips of the true believer.

She was unaware, now, of what her hands were doing. It was a small thing that had happened to her but it had shocked her into a great, new consciousness.

The ticking of a clock is a trifling annoyance as a rule, but now and again it makes us aware that time is carrying us away to the sea of darkness, and then we feel the old futility and the sudden sense of doom.

So with Mary Lamont this unannounced departure of Kildare was the light stroke that set a great bell ringing in her. She had been shaping her whole life and soul to the thought of Kildare; but what did she mean to him, after all? Love is of a thousand varieties, from the divine passion to the dull acceptance of stalled oxen.

Her unthinking hands now had turned over the desk-papers to the very bottom of the pile; and there she saw again the note addressed to Kildare and marked "Personal." She remembered it now, with a shock.

In spite of the fact that he had passed it over casually, with the remark that he was only an interne, not a person, she should have brought it to his attention again. Or, since he refused to read it, she should have opened it herself.

There are a thousand things which a patient may well feel should come under the eyes of the doctor alone; but a trained nurse also must be an impersonal creature.

Before she had finished this thought the envelope was opened and her eyes were reading the words of the note which had been written by Marguerite Paston and William Carew.

She glanced it through once and found it merely a note of adieu.

She read through it carefully a second time. It seemed to her startled mind that this was like an answer to the question which had been flung at her the moment before. What did she mean to Kildare?

Not what these two young lovers meant to one another, at least. For somehow, though nothing was stated definitely, the idea crept out from among the words that here were two who were ready to die, calmly, because the world would not accept them together.

Once more she studied the note and the idea seemed more vague than her surmise; but Jimmy Kildare would know the truth. He would catch up the implications instantly.

Perhaps it was already too late. Perhaps they already were dead; perhaps this rain which thrummed against the windows was beating against their faces.

She got leave of absence from Molly Cavendish and took the train for Dartford; from there she could get transportation to Medwick in a bus, in a taxi if there were no direct bus line.

SOME three hours later she was in the house of Stephen Kildare in Dartford. She had not been able to avoid the temptation to look in at the place where Jimmy had first found soil to grow in.

The old framed photographs, the rugs, the Victorian furniture, the very nature of the waxed floorboards would have meant vital things to her, even on the morning of this day.

Those grim faces along the wall would have seemed, this morning, the ancestors of her children-to-be; but now she was partially withdrawn from a state of mind and being that seemed to her like a dream.

This old woman with the loose folds of flesh in her face was nothing to her and never could be anything to her children, probably.

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She felt that sense of time which is like a physical uncleanness. The faint odors of generations of cookery breathed out of these rooms and her spirit shrank from the entire scene.

Out of the mud of Dartford Kildare had grown, and something muddy and uninspired still remained in his nature. Let her rather have some shining youth, with a few centuries of high breeding and culture behind him. . . .

She was being introduced to another girl of her own age, a Beatrice Raymond, who had come in bringing a fishing rod in a case. She had thrown a coat over her head and shoulders to protect her from the rain while she was running from the adjoining house.

It had just come to her, she said, that Jimmy had left the fishing rod in the old blacksmith shop behind the barn.

"How in the world did you ever think about it, dear, after all this time?" asked Mrs. Kildare.

"I was just wondering what would make Jimmy forget a fishing rod, you know. Then I remembered the day. We were coming in from the creek; and he saw Liz Akins' dog limping across the field. He dropped the rod in the old shop and went after the dog to see what was wrong . . . But there it is!"

She gave over the case to Mrs. Kildare and left, only pausing at the door to say: "How is the doctor?"

"He's working back at Medwick again," said Mrs. Kildare, "but Jimmy's out there, too; so I suppose it'll be all right."

"If Jimmy's there, everything will come out," said Beatrice Raymond, and disappeared.

"She's really lovely, isn't she?" said Mary Lamont.

"Oh, it isn't her looks that count," said Mrs. Kildare. "They're just the outside wrapping, but I know everything that's in that parcel and it's all good. I've known it for years, and it's every bit good. Even Jimmy used to think so, and maybe he'll think so again, but you know how he is; girls don't mean a great deal to him just now."

"I suppose not," said Mary Lamont.

"Working with him as much as you do, you must have seen that girls don't excite him often; and when they do come along into his attention, it's only for a moment, and only a surface ripple at that."

"I think that's true," said Mary Lamont soberly.

"But just now he's working to make himself all that God meant him to be; and later on he'll open his eyes to other things. I hope it will be Beatrice, because a doctor's wife should be a patient woman, you know."

"Of course," said the girl, and to herself she was thinking: Patience, calm, gentleness, endurance, and hands far busier than the brain—that's what it takes to be a doctor's wife. And all the sheen and beauty of bright, active moments, excitement and hope, are lost to her.

There *are* such things. She carried in her purse a letter written by two people who perhaps felt that it was better to die rather than to permit that high and lonely expectation to be tarnished by the world.

There was another point of deadly importance: Jimmy had not found the time, he had not thought it worth while, perhaps, to tell his mother about her.

She said as she stood up to leave: "I think Jimmy *will* come back to her, some day. I think I hope he does."

"That's sweet of you," said the mother. "They'd make a pair who would work along quietly to get the good things; just quiet and work, that's what does it."

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"Just quiet and work," the girl kept saying to herself as the bus carried her toward Medwick. "Quiet—work—then stooping shoulders—and all for a man who doesn't care? Not a great care, at least—not a care great enough to keep a Mary Lamont in his mind."

SHE found the way to the Lancey cottage. No one answered her ring. Perhaps the uproar of the rain was too great for it to be heard.

She found the door unlatched and walked in. Muddy footprints tracked up and down the hall, some drying in a thin streaking of gray, most often still wet.

As she closed the door, she shut away so much of the violence of the storm that she could hear voices, clearly, in the next room. She recognized the voice of Jack Davison, saying: "But what's the use hanging on until we're beaten to a pulp? We've lost already. Kildare, we're cooked. You always think that a thing can be bulldogged through, but we're cooked."

"Absolutely," said another. "Particularly since you had your scene with Winslow. Good Lord, Jimmy, how could you have been wild enough to set a date line? How could you have been crazy enough to tell the man that he'd be dead before Monday?"

"You've heard that, have you?" asked the voice of Kildare, and she recognized in its extreme quiet the absolute grimness of his fighting mood.

"Of course I've heard it," said another. "The whole town is talking about it and laughing at you. Winslow is laughing, too."

"No," said Kildare, "Winslow isn't laughing. Whatever is happening, Winslow isn't laughing, I'd say."

"The fact is," said another, "you've done us in, Kildare! I think we would have had a fighting chance, but you've done us in. When you talked to Winslow and lost your temper, you cut the last ground from under our feet!"

"I didn't lose my temper. I told him the truth," said Kildare.

"Come, come, Kildare," broke in a highly irritated voice. "You've been working with Gillespie; you've done yourself pretty proud a number of times; but don't let it go to your head; don't try to make yourself into a prophet. I've *seen* Winslow, and I've seen him at close range. I didn't see anything wrong with him except his Yankee meanness sticking out at every pore."

"You can't talk like that to Jimmy," said Davison, suddenly.

"What'll keep me from it?"

"I'll keep you!" said Davison.

"Back up!" said Kildare. "Both of you, back up."

"I'm going to knock his head off," said Davison.

"I'll take care of my own dignity," said Kildare. "I don't need help. . . ."

The voices went on, sometimes shouting. Mary Lamont sat down in the hall and wrote in a fine hand on one of her cards:

Jimmy, dear, here is a letter that you must read. I hope it doesn't mean what I guess. Another thing I guess is that we don't mean to one another what these two mean. In fact, I wonder if there's anything important—really important—between us.

I've got a vacation coming to me and I'm taking it now. I need to do a lot of thinking.

Mary

P. S.—Don't for heaven's sake hang on in Medwick trying to do the impossible. Do for once *believe what other people tell you instead of following your own stubborn instinct. Some day that same instinct may ruin your life. Dear Jimmy, be careful!*

She had an impulse, as soon as the note was written, to crumple it in her hand and throw it away; but after a moment she slid the note into the en-

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velope, and posted the envelope itself right on the ledge of the hall telephone where it could not fail to be seen.

After that, she left the house. The rain beat down on her with a thousand small, angry hands. She stopped, took a deep breath, and went resolutely on.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LONGEST NIGHT

DOCTOR CAREW, as usual, was dropping one telephone and picking up another, snapping out his answers sharply. He was surprised by a voice as dry and brisk as his own, which said to him over the line:

"This is Kildare speaking. I'd like to know where your son is."

"Back in the university, of course. What do you mean by breaking in on me with—"

"Because he's not at the university."

Carew lost half his anger. It was replaced by astonishment.

"What makes you think that he's not?" he demanded.

"Ring the college, if you want to make sure. He hasn't been back there since he talked with you the other day."

"That's impossible," said Carew.

"Nothing's impossible," said Kildare. "Not to a young man with any spirit when he's whipped up into a corner. I'd like to know what you said to him."

"Who gives you the right to know what I say to my own son?" shouted Carew.

"The right to keep him from dying," said Kildare.

"Dying? My God!" whispered Carew.

"Why not?" asked Kildare. "You saw the girl. She's worth dying for, isn't she?"

"A baby—a baby hardly out of the cradle. Kildare, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying: Get on their trail, for God's sake. Ring the university first to make sure that he's not there. Then start on the trail; go to the girl's address; find out where they've been seen. They'll be together."

"Kildare, are you talking about—about self-destruction? Are you telling me . . . Kildare, how long will it take you to get here?"

"I can't leave Medwick till tomorrow. Perhaps I can't leave it then," said Kildare. "You've got to work alone, till then.

"But listen to me; unless you save them, you've thrown away something worth more than the whole hospital and all the people in it. Ring the university and then get after them."

Afterward, Kildare sat in the dimness of the hallway and read again the note which Mary Lamont had left for him: . . . *We don't mean to one another what these two mean. In fact, I wonder if there's anything important . . . between us.*

After a while he found his hands cold and rubbed them together but the chill would not leave him. It had penetrated his whole body as deep as the heart.

HE WENT up to the room of the Davisons. Jack was packing; Joan lay on the bed with her face to the wall.

"Take those things out and put them back in the bureau," said Kildare.

Davison stared at him, fighting mad for an instant.

Then he changed and said, quietly: "All right, Jimmy."

"Are the others getting out?" asked Kildare.

"They're packing and all that. But I don't think they'll get out till you give the word. They're a little ashamed of the way they talked to you."

"That doesn't matter," said Kildare.

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He looked at Joan. The rain kept rattling steadily on the roof. There was a streak of fresh wetness down the wall beside the bed where the rain had found a leak in the roof.

He went over to the girl and sat down beside her. She put a hand back toward him without turning her head.

"Jimmy?"

"Yes," he said.

"What are we going to do, Jimmy? We've *no* place to go now."

"There's still a hope right here in Medwick," he said. He sat up, breathless.

"There's still a sort of a chance, and I'm going to take it now," he said.

"You hear, Jack?" cried the girl. "I *told* you that Jimmy Kildare couldn't be beaten as quickly as this!"

Davison followed him out into the hall. He whispered: "You shouldn't have said that, Jimmy."

"Perhaps I shouldn't," admitted Kildare.

"I know you're the sort to put your whole life on the turn of the card; but it'll break Joan to pieces, now, when you fail."

"Perhaps it will," said Kildare, and went down the stairs without another word.

He spent some time back in Davison's laboratory, then took his medical kit and walked through the rain to the house of Geoffrey Winslow.

At his ring the door was opened by Mrs. Winslow. She, tall and pale as a stone, said through the screen. "What will you have, young man?"

"My name is Kildare," he began, "I would like—"

"I know your name well enough," she said bitterly. "I wish to the kind God that I'd never heard it. You're the one who tries to frighten people to death, aren't you?"

"I've come to see Mr. Winslow," he said.

"I'll never let you come within a thousand miles of him!" she declared. She pushed the door almost shut. "Not while I have my wits about me," she added.

Kildare opened the screen and pushed the door wide against the resistance of the woman.

"I'll call in the neighbors. I'll scream!" she told him, the excitement shutting away her breath so that she hardly could whisper.

"I'm going to give him a chance to live," said Kildare. "Will you let me do that?"

She began to wring her hands. The dry skin sounded like paper.

"It was only anger that made you talk in that wild way to Geoffrey," she said pleadingly. "There wasn't any truth about—about what might happen before Monday?"

"I told him the truth," said Kildare. "I want to save him from it, if you'll let me."

He had to catch her by the elbows to steady her, but she rallied herself quickly, her lips parted.

"I'll take you to him," she said.

HE WENT up the stairs behind her. In the upper hall she paused at a door and looked with a sort of woeful doubt toward Kildare. Then she knocked and opened the door a trifle.

"Geoffrey," she said, "may I bring him in?"

"What him?" asked Winslow.

"The man who said it—the man who said the thing to you, Geoffrey!"

"Get him out of my thought and out of my house," commanded Winslow.

She glanced at Kildare again, making a gesture of surrender. Kildare walked through the door and closed it behind him.

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A small coal fire burned in the grate across the room and Winslow was slouched down in an easy chair just before it. He started up out of the chair when he saw Kildare.

He was as if an outer garment of flesh had dropped away from him. He had been on the verge of an angry outburst of words; but now he controlled himself and began to gather his dignity coldly around him.

Kildare said: "You're too weak, just now, to throw me out of your house. Will you let me try to explain why I'm here? A doctor takes an oath to heal where and when he can; and you're dying of a most violent form of pernicious anemia, Mr. Winslow. Will you let me help you?"

"A man's life isn't long enough," said Winslow, "for him to be changing his mind and changing his mind. I've spoken my thought about you and the rest of them, and I haven't changed."

"Sit down," invited Kildare. "Because I intend to stay here a while and argue the point with you."

WHEN Kildare came out of the house into the downpour, he was joined instantly by Davison, wet as a drowned rat, his hat knocked out of shape and hanging down over his eyes.

"You ought to be back there with Joan," said Kildare. "What are you doing out here?"

"There was a queer look about you when you left the Lancey house," said Davison, "so I trailed you along to see what you were about to do. No matter what I expected you to do, I never expected to see you get into Winslow's cave. What have you been doing to the old devil? Arguing?"

"In a way," said Kildare.

"Well, admit that you lost your point."

"I probably did," said Kildare. "What else is eating you, Jack?"

"Your father has just come in at the Lancey house," said Davison. "He wanted some drugs and odds and ends before he goes back on his rounds through Medwick. I thought you'd want to see him before he left."

"Is he all in?" asked Kildare.

He looked straight before him and gripped his jaws hard together.

"He's not as bad as you think," said Davison, "but he needs some attention."

"I'll attend to him," said Kildare.

He found his father in the kitchen of the Lancey house pouring into a tin cup coffee which he had just brewed.

The nozzle of the pot chattered against the edge of the cup, in his trembling hands.

"Ah, Jimmy," he said. "Ah, my boy —here you are again! I just dropped in for a swallow of coffee . . ."

There was something about him infinitely apologetic and shrinking, as if he wished to dodge even the eye of his son. Kildare pretended not to look at him.

He merely said: "How are things going?"

"Quite briskly," said the father. "Quite a few calls made and just a few more to finish off with before I go home."

"Were you home yesterday?" asked Kildare.

"Why, yes, certainly," said the father.

"And slept home last night?"

"As a matter of fact I had to telephone to your mother that I was held up. However, I had an excellent sleep as it was."

"How long?" asked Kildare.

"Well, quite a few hours. Now I'll just swallow this and trot along about my business."

"Wait a moment," said Kildare.

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"There's no use arguing with me, Jimmy," he answered. "If you and your men can't get at these people, I must do my best . . ."

"I'm not arguing," said Kildare. "Of course they need help and someone has to give it to them. There's an old Hippocrates and all that to remember, naturally. I was just thinking of something that might brace you up quite a bit for your rounds. Let me give you a couple of these in your coffee."

"What are they, Jimmy?"

"That's a secret of my own. If you like the effect, I'll tell you about it."

"You're not forming a habit of relying on drugs, Jimmy?"

"Not a chance. I take these when I've got to get through something. That's all."

"In that case I might try them. One, I think. Just one, Jimmy."

"Very well," said Kildare, and pinching two of the pills together, he dropped them together into the coffee.

"Now sit down and wait till the stuff takes hold on you," he directed. "It gives you a rather drowsy sense, first. Just relax and let it take hold. You rouse out of it like a new man."

"Not strychnine?" asked the father. "Not strychnine combined with some hypnotic?"

"You've never heard of this sort of thing as a stimulant," said Kildare. "It's completely new."

"Very well," said the father, and drank the coffee down.

"Just sit there for five or ten minutes," said Kildare.

"I'm a good patient, Jimmy. I'll follow orders."

HE RELAXED in the chair. It was growing dusk. A moment later Midge Whalen came into the dim doorway.

"Doctor Carew wants you on the telephone," he said. Kildare walked into the hall. "I'm sorry that I let my tongue get away from me," said Whalen. "I'm going to stick this out to the last man."

"I knew you weren't a rat," said Kildare. "Forget about it. Besides, there's a ghost of a chance that the ship won't sink, after all."

"Really?"

"Yes. Tell the others. Tell Joan Davison, most of all."

"What's the reason?"

"It's not a thing I can tell you, it's so far-fetched. Be a good fellow and wink at them and make a mystery of it, as if you were in the know."

"I'll do that," said Whalen, laughing.

On the telephone Carew said: "Kildare, where have you been? I've gone out of my mind trying to reach you. I telephoned to the university. You were right. God forgive me, my boy hasn't appeared at his college since I talked with him!"

"I'm sorry for you, sir," said Kildare.

"Oh, damn sorrow and me! Perhaps I *am* damned. Kildare, will you help me? Will you come back here and help me to get on the trail?"

"Isn't there a sign of them?"

There was a silence. Then the controlled voice said: "Not a single sign."

"You tried her place?"

"There was not a hint in her place of where they might have gone. Only a strong hint that they had left."

"What sort of a hint?"

"Apparently everything in the place had been sold to second-hand dealers, or pawned. Kildare, you have a devilish faculty of seeing through the moves and motives of people. Will you come help me, my dear boy? Or must I call in the police?"

"Don't call in the police. The law can't stop them, you know."

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"I understand that. They're a law to themselves, now."

"I'll be there tomorrow, if things go well out here."

"What things?"

"It's a long story. There's a ghost of a chance that I may be through here and then I'll come straight to you, sir."

"God bless you, Kildare. But listen to me: *must* you stay there? You can't come straight to me this moment?"

"It has to do with the welfare of the whole town, sir."

There was another long pause.

"You're right, of course. . . . Kildare!"

"Yes, sir."

"Kildare, will they . . ."

"I don't think so," lied Kildare in a strong voice. "I think that they'll linger out all the moments that are left to them."

AFTERWARD, Kildare called the hospital back and spoke to Molly Cavendish. "Mary Lamont has gone on vacation, hasn't she?"

"She's gone on something," said Molly Cavendish. "Vacation you well may call it. She has a good deal to rest up from—and well you know it!"

"Has she gone up to Vermont?"

"I don't know. How should I know and why should I care?"

"Wire her right away and tell her that I want her back at the hospital tomorrow."

"I'll do nothing of the kind," said Molly Cavendish. "The child has a right . . ."

"Never mind her rights. Send the wire."

"Not even Dr. Carew has a right to call a nurse in off vacation!"

"Dr. Carew can do his own worrying. I'll do mine. Just send that wire, please!"

"I'll do it, then," said the Cavendish, "and a fine slap in the face I hope you'll get for it!"

Kildare returned to the kitchen and found that his father had fallen into a profound sleep, almost dropping out of his chair. He lifted the frail body in his arms and carried it from the room.

. . . The dusk turned to night and Stephen Kildare slept. His son telephoned to Dartford: "He's resting, Mother. He'll be a better looking man tomorrow than he is today."

"Jimmy, what are *you* doing in Medwick? What will Dr. Gillespie have to say about you out there in Medwick?"

"I'll take care of myself. I know how to drop my feet."

"You'll watch your poor, silly, dear father, Jimmy?"

"I'll watch him, Mother."

"There was that sweet thing, that Mary Lamont, here today."

"Mary—in our house?"

"Yes. She was taking a message to you, dear. Did you see her?"

"I was busy, it seems, when she came," said Kildare, heavily. "But what did you talk to her about, Mother?"

"Talk to her? Oh, about nothing much—except that Beatrice dropped in. I talked about Beatrice."

"Oh, you talked about Beatrice?"

"What do you think? She found that old fishing rod of yours that's been lost so long! Bless her, what a girl she is, Jimmy!"

After that Kildare had the night to wait through. He kept a chair at the side of his father and dozed, from time to time, but now and again he slipped the card from Mary out of his pocket and glanced over what she had written.

It was the longest night of his life.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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Stars in My Crown

Vivid Novelet of the Ring

By CLARK BODEY

Author of "The Game's on Ice", etc.

Remember all the talk last year about whether Joe Bryan would fight a return match with Bat Tighe in a try at winning back his title—and remember how, even after the ex-champ had signed for the bout, nobody was sure whether he'd ever climb into the ring? Well, of course you all know what happened—but here's the inside story of why and how it happened, told by the man who saw it all from the beginning

I

ONLY a guy who has come all the way up the ladder with a champ, the way I'd done with Joe Bryan, could understand the way I felt at the end of the fourteenth in that title fight.

There was the Big Boy up there under the blazin' white ring lights, stavin' off Bat Tighe's wild hooks and absorbin' the worst of them on his elbows and gloves, still tryin' to make it look right even though he's been hurt in the fourth by that lucky punch to the head. He's bein' cut to ribbons by a slugger just the same way Joe himself cut a hundred or so of the leather-slingers to pieces to get to the top. It's awful. Because Joe is laughin'.

Bat Tighe swings, and Joe has sense enough to blur the right hook off his cheek before he goes into a clinch with the blood runnin' down Tighe's hairy belly. Just then the gong rings and the ref pries 'em apart. Up above us in Joe's corner Danny Deeter snaps out something at the seconds and they hop through the ropes and go out and grab the Big Boy—he's started toward a neutral corner!

A yell rips up from the crowd but by this time the seconds have got Joe turned around. He gives them a foolish sort of grin and does a funny sidestep dance toward the corner.

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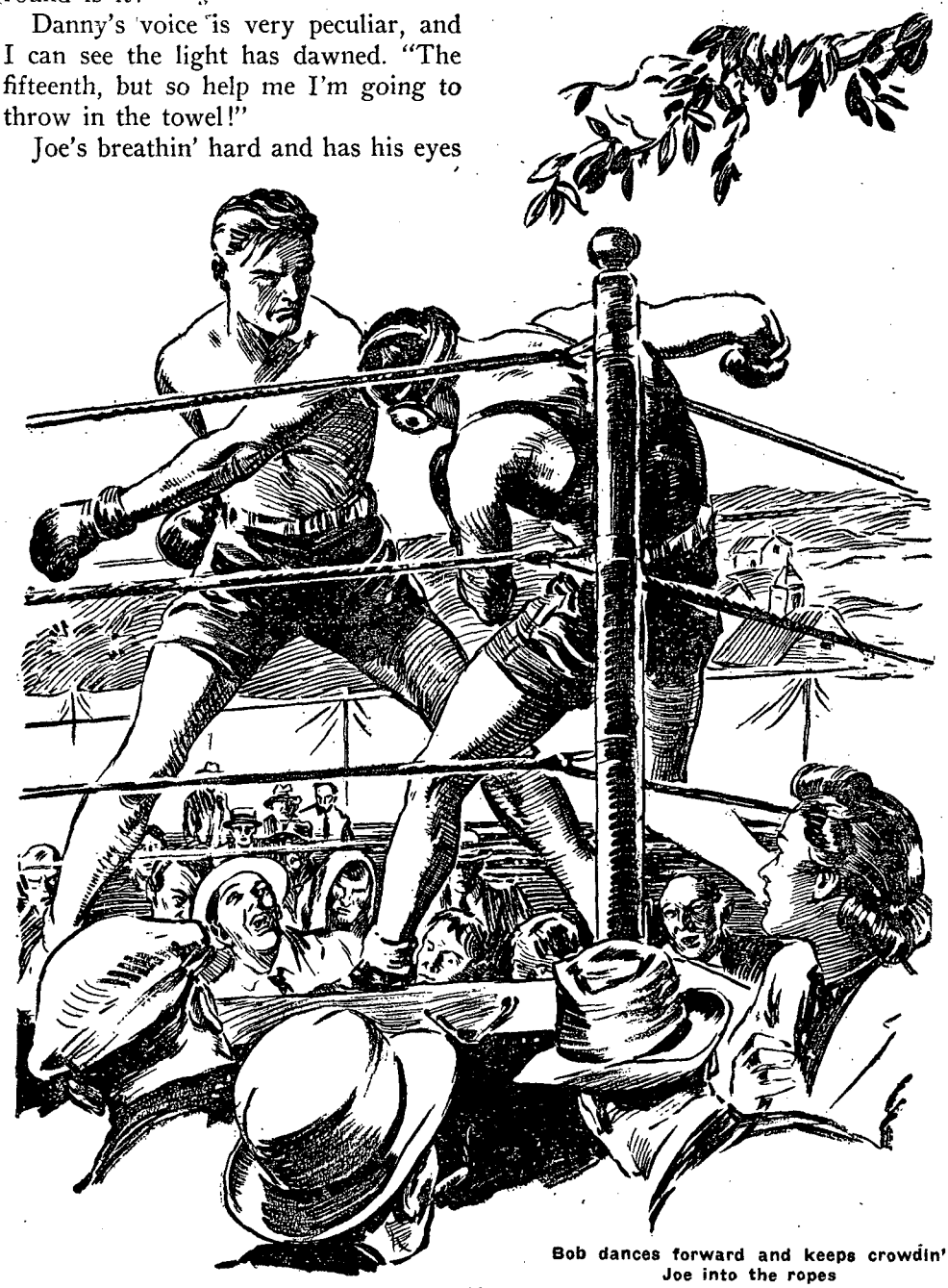
"What's wrong, Joe, you hurt?" Danny snaps.

Joe laughs at him and leans back on the ropes. "Hell, no, I'll take this palooka yet. We're just havin' fun. What round is it?"

Danny's voice is very peculiar, and I can see the light has dawned. "The fifteenth, but so help me I'm going to throw in the towel!"

Joe's breathin' hard and has his eyes shut, but he still has sense enough to hear what Danny intends to do and he grabs his arm. "You do, Danny, and I'll knock you clean out of the ring."

Danny takes one look at Joe and



Bob dances forward and keeps crowdin' Joe into the ropes

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nods. He goes to work with the smellin' salts while the seconds handle the sponge. But the trouble with Joe is inside his head where those salts won't do any good—that's why, ever since the fourth, he's been fightin' like a man throwin' punches under water, with all his speed and timin' gone haywire. Seven times he's put the title on the line and kept it, and now he's losin' it to a slugger.

"Get that stuff away," Joe says, pawin' the salts from his face. "I'm all right. I can see Pipsqueak down there. So long as I can see her I'm all right."

MYSELF, I look down to the fourth row where Terry Govern is sittin' with Joe's white orchids at her shoulder. The Big Boy always sends her white orchids before every title bout and she's wearin' them again, though I can see her face is white and very unhappy as she sits there with Bob Custer at her elbow. Terry is—well, she's just Terry; Bob is the lightheavy contender.

From the look on Terry Govern's face I know she's seen what I've seen, and so has Bob. And I remember how Terry looked when Joe told her he'd signed for this fight with Bat Tighe.

"But why, Joe—*why?*" she asked. "You don't need the money." Her blue eyes is round and she wrinkles up that daffy little nose. "Why?" she keeps askin', just like a kid.

"Because, Pipsqueak, I like to fight. I can't explain it—it's just there."

As Terry says, it would've been different if Joe had needed the dough from these title bouts, but he don't. He's got a hundred grand salted down in Bryan's Chop House where the lamb chops come grilled on charcoal and not done up in paper panties. Most of the time his place is as busy as a beehive, to coin a phrase. So it ain't money Joe's after.

Sometimes I wonder just what the big lug actually does want. Here two years ago he could've sat back and fought maybe one nice, safe title-bout a year; but no, his ribs has to go and toss the title on the line to all and sundry and in two years he's fought these seven bouts and won 'em all by knockouts. Which is not only very dopey, but damn dangerous, as this slugaroo with Bat Tighe is proving. Time was, Joe would've shook off the effects and gone back with a flash to murder this annoying gent, but now he can't seem to snap out of it. I am unhappy about this. And so is Terry and Boy-Blue Custer.

There's only one answer to it I can see: either Joe's been hurt bad or he's beginning to amble down Queer Street.

You can guess how that makes me feel. Because Joe Bryan is one of the swellest fellows who ever put on a glove. That is—he is, outside the ring. In the ring it's another basket of herring. He has what they call the killer instinct. He's about as much fun to get mixed up with as a steam roller. Of course a steam roller don't keep grinning at you as it plows you under, but that is the general idea.

But outside the ring he's free and easy and he probably cashes more rubber checks than any restaurant man in town. He stands treat to all his pals on New Year's Eve, gives 'em a free turkey dinner. Matter of fact, that was how he met Terry Govern. She was just another stagestruck kid from Arkansas and she came in to eat one of Joe's free dinners on New Year's Eve, but the food stuck in her throat and she couldn't swallow. Bob Custer found her sittin' alone in a corner, bawling, too homesick to tell anybody her troubles and too stubborn to go back home broke. Bob isn't much more than a kid himself, and he's from a small town too.

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"Look, kid," Bob told her, "I'll loan you the dough to go home. Only quit crying!"

Then up came Joe Bryan, big and dark and handsome, and swaggerin', and pretty soon Terry's forgotten what she's cryin' about.

"If she can't keep her chin up she don't belong in this town," he started out, with one of his laughs. "Let her go back home!"

Terry Govern's blue eyes got angry and her head jerked up. "I can too keep my chin up—and I won't quit!"

Her eyes clashed with Joe's, and something not so harsh came into his face. "That's more like it, Pipsqueak," he said. He called the flower girl over and bought Terry some white orchids. Then, real solemn, he held her arm up. "The winner," he said and grinned.

At that time Joe Bryan was the new champ and ridin' the crest. He took Terry Govern with him wherever he went like a kind of lucky piece. Bob just tagged along. He was a nice, clean-cut kid who had been to college and wanted to be a champ. He was a boxer, the scientific kind. Joe Bryan kidded him about the fancy-Dan stuff but he liked him and told all the sportswriters the kid was good even if he never knocked his men out.

I guess that was the difference in a nutshell—Joe would cut a guy to pieces and then finish him off with a right on the button where Bob Custer would outpoint his man. When he knocked him out it was clean and quick without the gore. Joe played with 'em. Bob did a neat, merciful job. Like one of these big surgeons you see in the movies, very swift and accurate.

"You see," he'd say, "I keep thinking about the other guy's wife and kids—I'd hate to think I'd slugged him slaphappy."

"If it's his brains or mine," Joe would grin, "I'd rather do the scrambling."

If Joe kept on kiddin' Bob, Terry would come to his defense. But more often, she just sat and toyed with her drink and looked at Bob's honest young face. Bein' a boxer, he didn't have the puffy brow cuts and slashes Joe had collected from the sluggers. You'd hardly've known Bob was a fighter to look at him. Sometimes I wondered what Terry was thinking about when she looked at him, or if she even knew herself.

"Snap out of it kid," Joe would say. "You're marrying a guy who slugged his way up out of the steel mills. Fighting's a job like everything else. You got to be tough." I don't think he ever really proposed to her. Everybody just sort of took it for granted.

Then Terry would smile and wrinkle her nose at him. "I can take it, Joe," she'd say.

"That's better, baby."

BUT now something is wrong and I can see Terry's on to it. Danny Deeter starts to climb down out of the ring. She's sittin' on the edge of her seat and holdin' onto Bob's sleeve.

"Keep that cuffer buttoned up," Danny warns Joe. "Man, this is the title!"

"Don't worry," Joe says with that goofy grin. "This is the one that does it."

The gong rings and Joe gets up and goes out and you'll have to admit the mob was with him all the way. They stood up and just about lifted the roof. He's still a popular champ. They want him to win.

Bat Tighe comes out, weavin' and hookin', and Joe waits flat-footed for an openin', just wheelin' around and

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watchin' Bat. Tighe leaves himself open after a left at the jaw that misses and Joe starts to throw that well-known right to the button. But he hesitates a fraction of a second too long and it's too late.

Bat Tighe loops a left to the belly and Joe goes into the ropes and the contender is on him with both hands. Joe ties him up, but he's a bleeding mess from the cut Tighe has reopened over his eye. Before the ref can break 'em Joe manages to catch Tighe with a couple of stiff blows on the neck that the ref don't call.

Once, just once, before that round ends, Joe gets a chance that in the old days would've spelled curtains for Tighe. It comes after Bat has missed a haymaker right and is wide open for a counter-punch as he comes in. Ordinarily Joe's left would have exploded on his chin and the ball game would've been over. But again Joe can't seem to see the openin' until it's too late.

Danny, beside me, groans aloud. "My God—an opening as wide as a barn door and he didn't even see it!"

"Grab him after the decision and hustle him downstairs," I says. "I'll keep Terry away until he's snapped out of it."

Danny nods, and just then the gong rings and it's a decision. Right then Joe Bryan gets one of the biggest ovations an ex-champ ever got. It was five minutes before the place calmed down enough for the ref to lift Bat Tighe's glove. Somebody finally gets Joe to speak a word into a mike some guy has lugged into the ring.

"Say a word to the folks out there who've been listening in, will you, Joe?"

"Sure—"

Joe turns around to where the guy waits with one of these portable mikes and he looks awful with his eye cut and bleedin' down onto the towel around his neck, but he's still got that goofy grin. He turns to speak his piece into the mike and all at once a funny hush goes over the ringside.

Joe's pushed his face right into the mike like he didn't see it was there!

For a minute there's this queer silence, then Joe clowns to cover up and says. "All I want, folks—all I want is a chance to win that title back again —*soon.*"

The way that mob cuts loose then you'd think Joe Bryan had just won a fight, not lost it.

II

AS SOON as I could fight my way through that mob to where Terry and Bob stood, I did it. They were both still standin' on their seats, up back of the newspaper gang, watchin' them lead Joe below. Terry's one of these small, neat little blonds with a sort of gardenia and rose-petal complexion, but now she's dead white. She's hangin' onto Bob's hand like a frightened child. She looks about fourteen.

"Come on, Terry," I hear Bob say, "we'll go over to the restaurant and wait for Joe."

Terry shook her head, her lips tight, and can't speak.

I make the mistake of tryin' to lie to her.

"Tell you what," I says, takin' her other arm, "Joe's just tired. That dirty cuffer wore him out. He'll feel better after he's had a chance to rest up."

But Terry ain't any nitwit, even if she is a half-pint. She just looks at me. "All right, Spike. You don't have to tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Joe's going punch-drunk," she said. making her words very even and straight like a child might repeat some-

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thing it hates to say but has to. "He's been hit too often. He mustn't fight any more—not ever."

Bob Custer says quietly, "Terry's right, Spike."

There wasn't a thing I could say. There wasn't any use to deny what we'd all seen. So I just stood there beside Terry and Bob with Joe's white orchids right at my chin where Terry had pinned them to her shoulder—and all at once Terry's head comes up the way it had the night Joe had kidded her about being a winner.

"Take me downstairs now, please, Bob," she says. "I've always gone to see Joe after every fight. I just can't *not go* tonight." Her little face is very solemn and I know I can't argue.

We went down and the corridors were all filled with the peculiar-looking specimens who seem to hang around fight shops, and there were sound cables and bright lights in Joe's dressing-room door. When we went in a blast of laughter met us and it was like old times—almost.

"Pipsqueak!" Joe says when he catches sight of Terry. "Come in and join the party—we're celebrating. Bat'll be in in a minute and you can shake hands with the new champ. But he won't be champ long. I'm going to pin his ears back!"

Terry smiles at this, and puts up her hand and touches Joe on the bruise over his temple.

"Are you hurt, Joe?" she asked. And this is a new Terry. She's grown up in a hurry and ready to take whatever is coming.

"Hurt?" Joe laughs, a little too loud. "Bat just played a little too hard is all. I'm all right."

Bob Custer has been standin' back all this time, just watchin'. Now he comes up and puts a hand on Joe's shoulder and says, "You've had your fun, Joe. Now why don't you give up the racket and sell chops? I think it would make Terry happy if you would." And Bob has suddenly come of age too. The way the pair of them came up there, a little shaky but plenty determined, was a fine thing to see.

Joe looks at Bob and begins to laugh. Pretty soon Bob looks a little flushed and uncomfortable, but he takes it all right and grins too. Joe slips one arm around Bob's shoulder and one around Terry.

"You two guys," he says, "just can't take it. You don't belong in this kind of a setup. You're afraid I got hurt. Well, I didn't. I still got hair on my chest. Bat knows that. I'm going to fight him again and I'm going to be the only heavyweight champ who won his title back again. So what do you think about that."

This gets a very big hand from the touts in the room, and it also brings a white, unhappy smile to Terry's lips. She says, "All right, Joe. We won't talk about it now."

Bob fumbles with his hat. "We'll be up in the office over at the Chop House, Joe," he says.

Joe watches them go. There's a funny smile on his face.

"Take care of my girl, pal," he calls after Bob in a way that I don't think anything about then but I do later.

THERE being nothing for me to do around the dressing room as Joe grabs a shower and a rubdown and gets patched up, I follow Bob and Terry up above to the curb where we get a hack. On the way over Terry's quieter than usual and Bob is trying to make her think everything's roses and sunshine.

"You've been wanting Joe to hang up his gloves for a long time, Terry,"

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he says. "Why not now? Joe's rich. He's got a lot of friends. Now you can get married." The last part of that boy-scout speech came out as if somebody had extracted it with red-hot pincers.

Terry doesn't answer that for a minute. She looks out the window. "I wish," she said finally, "I wish that he would, but he won't. You know how Joe loves to fight—how he—".

Bob puts a hand over hers. "Don't try," he says. "I understand."

Terry looks at Bob's nice, clean-cut profile for a moment and then turns away. I wonder if she's considering how straight and tidy it is, and how ploughed up Joe's is going to be if he keeps on fighting. She shakes her head at Bob and says: "No, you don't know how it is with Joe, and I'm glad. You aren't fight-crazy like he is. It's like a disease with him."

There's nothing Bob or I can say to that because it's true. Then the cab comes to a stop and we get out and go into the Chop House. You might've expected a cloud of gloom to be hanging over the place, but such is not the case. All of Joe Bryan's pals—and there was a million of them in town that night—have come to patronize his place after the fight. This is very loyal and fine of them. After all if you've paid twenty bucks to watch a murder, it's polite to cough up for the flowers.

There's a buzz and stir as Terry and Bob and I go through the bar and up to Joe's office on the balcony. When we get inside the office Terry tugs off her hat and rumples her honey-colored hair and says, "Spike, I saw Doctor Maguire at the bar. Ask him to come up here right away—before Joe comes over."

"Sure, Terry." Terry is determined to learn the worst and get it over with.

So I go down.

IT'S like tryin' to buck a bargain counter rush to get to the place at the bar where Dr. Timothy Maguire is standin' with a glass of beer in his hand. Maguire is a big, black Irishman with gray dusted in at his temples and he is also one of the best brain specialists in the country. He happens to be a fight fan, too, and it was he who told Ernie Raft's manager not to let his boy fight any more just before the fight in which Ernie was killed.

I order a beer and wedge in at Maguire's elbow and say, without makin' it obvious, "Terry's up in the office, Doc, and wants to see you. Better go up the back way. She thinks—"

Maguire nodded. His face was solemn as his eyes met mine in the glass.

"I wondered if she might. I'll go right up, Spike."

After Maguire had drifted away, slappin' a few of the boys on the back like he was leavin', I followed. My beer had lost all its taste for me. I followed Maguire up the back way to the office a minute later. He was standin' by the window glaring down the street as if the neon lights hurt his eyes, when I came in, his hands spaded into his coat pockets.

Terry was walkin' up and down the office rug, and there's a look on her face that shows the torture she's goin' through, so I guess Maguire has told her what's what. Bob Custer sits on a leather-covered chair with his elbows on his knees.

"Oh, I've been so afraid it would happen," Terry is sayin'. "Joe's twenty-eight and he's got all the money he wants, but he still won't quit fighting!"

Maguire's pretty level-headed, and he loves Terry Govern the same way the rest of us do. He walks over and puts an arm about her slim shoulders. His voice is very gentle.

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"A fighting man's reasons aren't always easy to understand, Terry," he says. "It may be tough—but if he'll quit for anybody, he'll do it for you."

Terry made a helpless gesture. "Doc, I've talked until I'm purple. It doesn't do any good at all. He just says he likes to fight. Over and over he says it. He likes to fight. And he'll keep on fighting until one day he—" Terry shudders. "I think he likes to hurt people," she said as if she'd just found it out. "Maybe he doesn't know it—but it's true." There's no denyin' that in the ring Joe Bryan is a killer and his sparrin' pardners have often gone to join the Foreign Legion to lead a quiet life.

"You've got Joe wrong, Terry," Bob says. "He's hard, but he's fair."

Terry ignores that and looks at Maguire, her eyes level. "Joe's really going punch-drunk, isn't he?" she asked.

Maguire talks exactly as if he were in his own office, except that now and then his voice shakes a little. "Joe's had a few too many blows on the head, Terry. Each results in a tiny hemorrhage—too many eventually leads to damage to brain tissue. Loss of memory, temporary dissociation of ideas, lack of control of motor areas—all these are symptomatic. Tighe's blow on the temple tonight was a lucky punch. It slowed Joe up and made him lose the fight. There may be no serious after-effects if Joe stops fighting now. If he fights again and gets hit on the same spot, well—"

"You mean," Terry asks in a whisper, "he'd really be punch-drunk then?"

Maguire nodded, frowning.

"Then he's not going to fight again," she said. "I don't care what we do—we've got to stop him."

"That may be easier said than done," Maguire told her.

The buzzer whirred and I said, "Joe's coming now. I asked the guy up front to let us know. Shall we beat it, Terry?"

She shook her head, and brought her chin up like she had to fight to keep a smile on her lips. "Please stay."

WE WAIT in an uncomfortable silence while we can hear the mob downstairs givin' Joe a big hand. I can't help but think how much easier our job would be to persuade Joe his fightin' days was over if he did not get so much applause and if he did not enjoy it so much.

After a long wait the door busts open and Joe comes in with Danny Deeter on his heels. Joe's face is cut and puffed and there're some stitches in it over the cheek so that he can't smile when Terry comes up and puts her arms around him. I notice she crushes the white orchids he'd give her when Joe bends over to let her kiss him on the other cheek.

"I'm a funny-looking lug for a nice girl to kiss," he says.

There's that stir and vitality in the room that Joe Bryan always brings along with him; you know how it is with some big men, they just come into a room and it's like they can't turn around without brushin' somethin' fragile off the shelves and breakin' it. Joe's like that. Well, he straightens up and finds us all starin' at him and he laughs a little queer-like.

"This is a fine morgue," he says. "Let's have a little life."

Terry breaks right into it. "Joe, we all want you to quit fighting. We want you to hang up your gloves—now."

Joe's eyes have somethin' funny in them as he holds Terry off at arm's length and laughs at her. "Hey, you don't mean that, Pipsqueak. Why, I can take Bat in no time at all. He's just a dirty hooker. He landed a lucky one—"

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"They're all lucky ones, Joe," Custer puts in, joining the general last-stand. "We're afraid you might get hurt if you keep on."

Maguire speaks up. "Forget the title, Joe. Forget while you've still got all the marbles."

Joe wheels on Doc, and while his lips are smilin' his blue eyes are not.

"What've you been telling Pipsqueak, anyway?" he asks.

Danny Deeter touches Joe's arm. "Doc's right. Let Bat keep the title. We made our pile. Give some of the rest of the boys a chance."

"There's no use," I put in, "keeping on until you're punch drunk, Joe."

The minute I said that I wish I am in Albany or someplace. The doc's remark about keeping all his marbles hadn't really sunk in, but that one word did it—it was like a red flag. "Oh, so that's it! You think I'm going punchy, do you? So you see me take one lucky punch and I'm already slug-nutty!"

A funny shrewd look come into Joe's eyes then, and his voice dropped to a whisper. I'd seen that look too often in a stumble-bum's eyes not to recognize it. It comes just before the old routine: "See that fellow over there? He's slap-happy. But me, I'm fine."

Joe's still deciding whether to hit me with his fist or the whole building—and I am praying for the latter as probably being healthier, when Kid Custer steps in. "We're just trying to tell you that we're afraid you *might* go punch-drunk, not that you're punchy now."

Joe's battered face gets a look on it that I don't like to see. He's still sore as a fiddler's pup or he wouldn't have sounded off the way he did. Not to Bob, anyhow. "Listen, you two-bit creampuff. You ain't got any guts in the ring, so you think I'm a softie too. Well, I'm not and I'll fight Bat to show you. I'll get the title back. And I'll be the first guy ever did. So tie that on your lollipop and chew on it."

III

HE HEELS around and goes out, bangin' the door. For a long minute there isn't a word spoke. Danny Deeter just stands and mops his neck. Bob Custer looks stunned. Finally Doc Maguire touches Terry on the arm.

"Don't worry," he says. "I think I can fix it so he won't get past the physical in any ring again."

Terry thanked him with her eyes.

Until now I hadn't noticed Mike Brewer had come in the back way and was listenin' to all that had gone on. Now he strolls into the light, hat on the back of his head, and comes up to Maguire. "Can I print that, Doc?" he asks, and makes a funny motion with his hand up by his head. "Can I spill the works about Joe?"

"Yes!" said Terry, suddenly. "Go ahead and print it. Maybe then they'll make Joe stay out of the ring."

"Thanks," says Mike Brewer, touchin' his hat. "My public is going to enjoy this—bless their flinty little hearts."

. . . But the idea of publishin' a statement on Joe's condition does a boomerang. It starts one of those gab-fests in the newspapers that sportswriters live by, and the fans eat up. It reminds you of the argument the fans had about Fred Apostoli only it was twice as loud and about as many authorities agreed Joe Bryan wasn't hurt as bad as they said he was.

It wasn't long before Joe was like himself again—almost. He laughs and kids with the newspaper guys and slaps the customers on the back. He tells 'em it was his diet that was wrong and he's thinkin' of takin' up a fruit and nut diet like Lou Nova, crossed with Tony

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Galento's beer. Everybody laughs, and the fans keep comin' in droves to see Joe circulatin' around among the tables. Business was good. Too good.

If only those tomatoes had stopped clappin' Joe on the back and tellin' him he could take Bat Tighe in a return match, maybe Terry would've stood a chance. But she never let on and she kept her chin up.

"It'd be easy if it wasn't for the contract Joe's got with me," Danny Deeter tells us one night. "He's got the right to pick his opponent in one more fight. I can't do anything about it."

Terry has circles under her eyes from worry, and a little too much brave red on her lips these days. She laughs and tries to crack wise. But her heart is not in it. "Maybe I should give him a crew haircut. Isn't that what Delilah did to Samson?"

"And look what happens," Danny Deeter growls, "Samson brought down the house—right on top of himself!"

Bob Custer don't say anything, but keeps turnin' his glass of water 'round and 'round in his hands and once in a while lookin' up at Terry and then down again. Bob's got an attack of the nerves again, this time from a fight he's just had at the Garden with the little Filipino called Garcia. Bob had a hard time with the brown boy before he iced him and Garcia's still in the hospital with a busted vertebra.

"You're wearing down the crystal, darling," Terry tells him, coverin' one of his hands with her own. "They'll have to put it on the cover charge if you don't stop."

Bob upsets the glass in my lap and while I'm cleaning up the mess I can't help seeing him tighten his hand on hers. He sits up straighter. It's just a flash, but I catch something grateful in Bob's eyes.

"Sorry, Terry," he says. "I'm a fool. I—"

At this point, Maguire saunters over from the bar with a glass of beer in his hand.

"Any luck?" he asks Terry, inclining his head toward a table where Joe is kiddin' a party of customers from South Bend.

Terry's lips made a wry smile, and she shook her head.

Maguire sat down, and sipped at his beer and looked solemn. We all sit there like hunks of wood until Maguire coughs and says, "There's always a chance, of course, that Joe may see the light himself. If he could be made to think he's worse than he really is—"

His voice trails off, and I sit there feelin' like some guy in on a plot to blow up the White House along about Easter time with the lawn full of Easter eggs and kids. After all, Joe's been swell to all of us and it's only because we all love the big lug that we sit around, planning a dirty deal like this.

"That's out," says Bob Custer. "I won't pull a fast one on Joe. He's like a kid—he'd fall for it."

Danny Deeter growls, "He'll fall for Bat Tighe too, if his manager so much as waves an offer under his nose!"

"We all love Joe," says Maguire unnecessarily. "Remember that."

"But what can we *do?*" Terry asks.

"There's such a thing as making the truth seem untrue," says Maguire. "Here comes Joe now. Suppose you let me handle it."

JOE looks like any successful businessman, except that his face is harder and scarred and his hands are tough from his trade. His map is healed up again and he gives Terry a grin as he walks up to the table and stands with a hand on her shoulder.

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"Everything all right, folks?" he asks. "No complaints?"

"My steak was too thick," says Danny Deeter. "You're losin' money on me."

Maguire looks at Joe over the rim of his glass.

"You seem to be doing pretty well for yourself, Joe," he says. "Most ex-champs lose their public along with their title."

"They know I'm not washed up," he says, a little tougher than he has to be.

Terry reaches up and draws Joe down into a seat beside her.

"It's your personality, honey," she says, and cuddles her hand into his. Bob Custer hasn't opened his yap. He just sits there runnin' that empty glass around in his hands. Joe notices it, and slaps him on the back. "What's eating you, sweetheart? You still moping because you had to ice Garcia in the ninth?"

Bob looked up and his eyes were level. "It's his neck, Joe. They figure maybe he won't ever walk again."

Joe gave a husky laugh in the silence that followed. "Well, what of it? Garcia's just another brown boy. He might've hung one on you if you hadn't stopped playing with him and finished him when you did. How could you tell he wasn't in shape?"

Bob says, "I found out later he hadn't been eating regular. He was sending home all the money to his folks. For God's sake, Joe, stop grinning—don't you realize he may never *walk* again?"

There's a little tight silence and all at once Bob covers his face with his hands and says, "I'm sorry, everybody. I—I guess I let it get me down."

Joe puts a hand on Bob's shoulder and shakes him. "Okay, kid, okay. Just remember: He might've done it to you."

Everybody starts talkin' all at once and the tension eases, but I happen to look at Terry and she's sittin' there with her eyes on Joe in a way that puzzles me. It's like she's never really seen something about him before. As I say, there's a lot of chatter and pretty soon I hear Maguire ask in a lull in the conversation, "By the way, Joe, about that copper stock—better lay off it."

Joe often asks Maguire about investments, so this is nothing new. But Joe looks puzzled and frowns.

"What copper stock, Doc?" he asks.

Maguire glances at Danny Deeter and manages to look embarrassed. "Why, we were talking about it only yesterday, Joe," he says. "You haven't forgotten, have you?"

A slow flush begins to creep up Joe's neck into his cheeks. He looks around the table at the rest of us who are watchin' him and he gets flustered and on the defensive. Sweat begins to glisten on his forehead.

"Honest to God, Doc," he says hoarsely, "I don't remember your sayin' anything about any investments yesterday—"

"Skip it, Joe," says Maguire, lowerin' his eyes.

But Joe grabs his arm. "I've got to *know,* though, if you said—"

Terry gets on her feet. "Please, Joe," she says. "I'm tired. Take me home, will you?"

But Joe won't go. He ignores Terry. He passes a tremblin' hand over his face and a crafty look comes into his eyes. "Tell me when it was, Doc. I don't think it was yesterday at all you told me. I can check on that—tell me when it was!"

Maguire's very calm and deliberate. "All right, Joe," he says humoring him like he was talkin' to a child. "It was last week, perhaps. I can't even remem-

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ber. So forget it and take Terry home. She looks tired."

Terry's standing up, and the tension around that table has got into the air and people are lookin' our way. Bob Custer helps put her wrap around her in a clumsy, gentle sort of way. Maybe those two kids don't know they're in love with each other—and I guess Joe don't. That makes three.

Somethin' in Bob's manner attracts Joe's attention, and all at once he jumps up and in doin' so he bumps a tray of cocktails a waiter is bringin' by and the whole mess crashes to the floor. This time most of it goes down my back and I decide that love is not exactly a stabilizing influence. In Joe's wrought-up state it's the last straw.

"If she's bushed, take her home yourself," he snaps at Bob. "Maybe you both can have a good cry!"

He shoves the waiter aside and sloshes off, through two inches of dry Martini, his face hard and cold, the way it gets in the ring. Terry just stands there a moment, white and shaken, before she finally looks up at Bob and he takes her arm silently and they leave. Half the mob has turned to watch the ruckus and it's pretty embarrassing for all concerned.

"In the Middle Ages," says Danny Deeter, "they had a little scheme for letting water drip on a man's head until he went batty. Your scheme stinks the same way, Doc."

Maguire isn't lookin' at Joe, however. He's watchin' Bob Custer escort Terry out the side door.

"Hallucinations," he says, "are another mark of a punch-drunk condition. This is really a very interesting case."

Danny still don't get it. He fumbles and lights a cigarette.

"Good night, boys, I'm going to give myself an airing. I feel that I *need* it."

IV

DOC'S little scheme packed dynamite in large amounts. For a couple of weeks I watched Joe broodin' over it. Oh, he'd talk with folks and laugh and kid around. But when he was alone you could see that awful doubt eatin' into his peace of mind.

He'd be in the middle of a conversation when he'd stop short and look at the other guy real sharp, as if he was tryin' to remember whether he'd repeated himself. Which he hadn't. Or maybe he'd be signin' an order and he'd look shrewd and ask the waiter if he hadn't signed it before, sure. Pretty soon the help was beginnin' to eye Joe in a way that showed there was gossip goin' on behind the scenes—the thing snowballed just like that.

Your heart ached for Terry. She'd been in on it, so the poor dame couldn't go up to Joe and say, "Look, darling, you're not really slap-daffy. It's just that we all love you and this is our cute little way of showing it."

I think she still had hopes maybe Joe would quit.

The lie by this time had built up so that you could almost chart Joe's build-up to the explosion. Where the real punch-drunk reaction come in and where the phoney began you couldn't say—pretty soon Joe's losin' sleep and it begins to show on his face, and in the twitchin' of the muscle at the side of his mouth.

And then I guess Frankie Opp got wind of it. I was there the night Frankie and Bat and a couple of lads in boiled shirts come into the Chop House. Casual-like, understand. Nothin' on their minds. Just a nice, friendly visit. Oh, yeah!

"Business don't seem to have dropped off none, Joe," says Frankie, liftin' his

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highball glass to his pudgy nose. All of them are lined up at the brass rail. Joe knows this is the business but he don't let on.

"Folks have been nice to me, Frankie."

"Head still botherin' you, Joe?" asks Frankie.

"My head never bothered me, Frankie."

"My mistake, Joe. I thought maybe Bat, here, hurt you a little in that fourth round."

Joe laughs and throws an arm around Bat's shoulders. "Hurt me? Hell, I just got a little careless."

Frankie taps cigarette ashes off his vest. He sizes up these two maulers, and his eyes are cold and dead like a fish. "It's too bad you couldn't of give us another fight, Joe," he says. "It would make a good gate."

"What do you mean I *couldn't* give you another fight?" asks Joe.

"Well" — Frankie sort of looks around helpless at the boys—"I don't know how to put it, Joe. There's all this talk about you bein' punchy and all."

"Who's punchy? You guys are off your nut. I'll fight any time you say. All you have to do is put up the title!"

Frankie says, "All right, we'll put up the title. Okay, Joe."

"Now you're talking," says Joe and waves at the bartender. "Make this on the house, Bill!"

Somebody's give Danny Deeter wind of what's goin' on, but he comes bustin' through the crowd at the bar a minute too late. He grabs Joe's arm and says, "Listen, Joe, you can't do this. You been ribbed into somethin'—you can't fight again. Think of Terry!"

Joe is laughin', all palsy-walsy with the boys, but this sobers him up a little. "This is out of Terry's arena. Tell her not to worry."

Danny says, "Tell her yourself."

Sure enough, here comes Terry, with Bob Custer at her side. It takes just one look for me to see that it's Terry who's got a good grip on Bob's arm.

"Hello, Bob — hello, Pipsqueak!" says Joe, flushin'. "Hey, ain't you going to congratulate me?"

Terry turns her head on one side and says very quietly, "About what, Joe?"

A funny silence falls over the crowd at the bar. Joe looks flustered. "Well, about the fight. Bat and me are going to work again. Bat's putting the title on the line. Come on, laugh."

"Joe!" she says.

He throws his arm about Terry's shoulders and tugs her over to the bar where the bartender has put a glass of sherry. "Let's celebrate. I feel like celebrating. Come on, Bob."

Bob has been standin' at one side all this time looking like he had just been killed, and now he suddenly comes to and looks at Joe and shakes his head. "Nothing, thanks. I don't feel like it."

"Now what the—" said Joe, the red creepin' up into his neck the way it does when he's both puzzled and angry. He's laughin' and mad too and he's about to pop off when Terry touches his arm.

"Joe—Garcia's dead. The man Bob knocked out. He died this afternoon."

A HUSH fell over the mob at the bar, and everybody got very still. Somebody coughed, and somebody scuffled his feet. And the red went back down out of Joe's face and neck again. He looks first at Terry's small, white face and then he looks at Bob standin' there beside her.

"Gee, that's too bad," he says. "As meatballs go, Garcia was all right. But look, pal, you can't let that get you down this way—snap out of it, it might've happened to anybody!"

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Bob Custer looks at his right hand involuntarily—the one that has killed a man. His fingers are shakin', so you can see it's hit him bad. "I didn't sock him hard. He just looked surprised and then began to go down."

"Here, have a drink," says Joe, and hands Bob a glass which he tosses off and then wipes his hand across his lips.

Then he pushes off from the bar and goes out, and nobody says a word. It's still for a minute, and then Joe's rough laugh sort of blurs things over.

"All right, bartender!" he says. "This one'll be on the house—we'll make this one to Garcia!"

Terry's standin' right beside me, so I can hear the little gasp that tears itself from inside her. "Joe—you can't—"

"Huh?" Joe puts down his glass again. "What's wrong in drinking to Garcia? We'll all be dead some day. Garcia would like it."

Terry's eyes sort of fill with tears and her lips are workin' like it's hard for her to keep from cryin', and suddenly without a word she turns away from Joe and hustles out of the bar the same direction Bob Custer took. Joe stares after her a minute, and then a funny look comes into his eyes and he laughs sort of harsh.

. . . Joe's trainin' camp is a farm up in the Catskills, and it isn't a week before the place looks like a carnival. Joe spends money like water to keep the camp hummin'; it's like he's mad for excitement and somethin' goin' on all the time. The place is overrun with touts, sparrin' pardners, and fight bugs from the nearby towns who can run over afternoons and watch Joe Bryan spar.

Danny Deeter is in a savage mood. He sits around and watches Joe maulin' Pug Dawson one day up in the ring, and I can see he isn't pleased at what he sees. "He's too slow—he isn't making Joe open up."

Pug is one of these big also-ran heavyweight contenders, and good for nothing now except to push around the ring. He and Joe have a good time and give the fifty-cent seat customers a laugh, but it isn't championship stuff. Bat Tighe is fast and vicious and a hard hitter.

"Joe can't go any faster," I tell Danny, "and you know it."

"His timing might improve if he had a faster sparring pardner," Danny thinks aloud. "But I don't know who we can get. They're all meatballs. We need a boxer."

Just then I see Bob Custer and Terry come into the arena and down toward the plank seat where Danny and I are sittin'. Almost every day Bob drives Terry up from the hotel where she's staying. She sort of supervises Joe's diet, and tries to snap him out of it when he gets surly like he often does in trainin'.

Seein' Bob gives me the brainstorm that was going to bring the whole thing to a head.

"Why don't you get Bob?" I ask Danny. "Maybe it'd help Bob to get hold of himself. He's shied away from the gloves ever since Garcia died."

Danny Deeter's eyes got thoughtful and he pinched out his cigarette under his heel. "Maybe that ain't such a bad idea at that," he says.

BOB listens while Danny explains the situation out behind the barn, while Joe's gettin' a shower and a rubdown. Terry's in on it too. "Maybe if you can show Joe how bad he is," Danny explains, "he'll give up his idea of fighting Tighe. Right now, his timing is as bad as a pre-war flivver, and

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he keeps tearing punching bags loose to show he can still sock, when he ain't knocking sparring pardners out of the ring."

Terry's not said a word until now, but suddenly she opens up. "Bob, you mustn't. You're through—you promised me."

Bob thins his lips and looks at her, then drops his eyes.

"I'd do anything for you, Terry, and Joe. You know that." He turns to me. "Why can't the commission stop the fight, Spike?"

"Because," I tell him, "Maguire has examined him and has to admit he's all right. He is—until he gets another punch like that first one Tighe gave him."

"Joe won't have a Chinaman's chance," Danny agrees huskily, "if he goes into the ring with Tighe. He'll get his brains scrambled. He'll come out flatfooted. He'll listen to the birdies the rest of his life—and for what? Another crack at the crown!"

Bob looks down at his right hand. "I'll fight him whenever you say, Danny, if you think it'll help."

They started sparrin' together the next day. Danny gives out some kind of baloney about Joe needin' a faster man to work with. But it don't fool the newspaper boys any. They're all on hand to see the fun when Bob climbs through the ropes.

They make a funny pair, all right. Bob Custer is fit and tanned, and youth is written all over him as he walks across the ring with his springy step and when he looks around his eyes are quick and eager. Joe looks tough in his puffy headgear, and his step has lost its spring, so that tradin' leather is just a chore to him now.

It's his eyes that get me, though—they're shrewd and suspicious where they used to be like Bob's, bold and confident.

Danny acts as ref in the short three-minute rounds they're steppin' today. Joe comes out fast and they trade a lot of punches and Bob slaps a lot of lefts straight to the jaw. They're feather-puff blows, though, and I get the impression Bob's doing that to make Joe look right before the mob. Between the first and second rounds Joe clowns with Danny and is almost like himself.

When Joe's feeling okay he clowns a lot. You've no idea how sensitive a fight camp is to the mood of its fighter. Pretty soon the fog's thinned around us and everybody is wisecracking and feelin' good again and in the next Joe steps so fast that, honest, I begin to have hopes things ain't so bad as we've figured 'em.

Then, in the second, Bob begins to nail Joe's chin with his right. He has to do it to keep Joe from slammin' him all over the ring, only Bob forgets a little or somethin', because all at once he knocks Joe back into the ropes with a straight right punch that travels six inches. A snarl comes to Joe's lips.

Just why Bob didn't cover up I don't know, but he didn't and Joe comes back with a quick left and right to Bob's head that have all the steam behind them to lift Bob out of the ring. Bob goes into the ropes and Joe is on him with both hands. It's unnecessary, and it's cruel, but Joe's been stung and that's how he reacts.

DANNY manages to get Joe away, and the round is over but it has the customers up on their feet and talkin'. I shoot a quick look at Terry and she's twistin' her handkerchief in her fingers and lookin' at Bob's corner.

"Oh, that's cruel," she whispers to herself, "Joe didn't have to hurt him!"

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"That's just part of the business," I try to tell her. "It can't be helped—the boys get a little rough sometimes."

Her hand clenched and she said, "I hate it, hate it! I hope he never goes in another ring!" Her pretty blue eyes are dark and stormy, and the poor kid's shaking all over.

Just whether she was talkin' about Bob or Joe I couldn't tell—not then.

Well, I guess Terry had had enough because she asked me to take her up to the farmhouse where the office was. Inside it was cool and dim and after a while Danny Deeter comes up and then Bob after he's had a quick shower without a rubdown. Danny swings a leg over a table and mops his head.

"You all saw it—Joe's got no business being in a ring with Tighe."

Terry said, "It's awful. Isn't there something we can do?"

"You can't stop a fight on a hunch," I remind them. "After all Maguire did not *prove* anything."

"The big, dumb, stubborn lummox," says Terry. "First Maguire tries to rib him into having lapses of memory, then Spike here gets the bright idea of having Bob get into the ring and show him up." She whirls on Bob. "Either you carried Joe or you weren't trying! You tried to make him look good before all those sportswriters out there!"

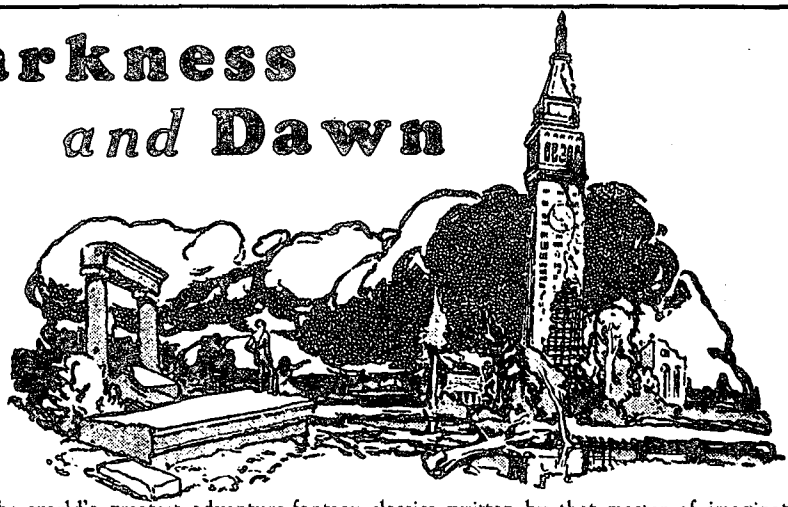
Bob drops his eyes and flexes his right hand. "It wasn't just that, Terry. I kept thinking about Garcia—I almost hit Joe once. I guess my nerve's all shot. I couldn't do it."

A voice behind us in the doorway says, "So you carried me, is that it?"

"Joe!" Terry's voice is a whisper.

Joe stands there, his robe whipped tight about him and his eyes hard and

Darkness and Dawn



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cold. That muscle at the side of his mouth was twitchin' and his lips are curled in contempt.

"Now I get it!" he goes on, slowly. "I get the whole setup, and it stinks. You get Maguire to frame me. Now you get my pal to try and knock me out—and he can't!" His voice gets husky and drops to a whisper. "He can't because he ain't good enough!"

Bob Custer says, "Look, Joe—" but Joe won't listen.

"All right, Pipsqueak," he says to Terry, "I'll make you a bargain. I'll fight three two-minute training rounds right now with your boy friend. If he wins I don't fight Bat Tighe. And if he loses he quits the ring!"

"Joe, are you crazy!" says Bob Custer.

That shrewd, suspicious look comes into Joe's eyes again. "No, I'm not crazy, and I ain't punchy either. You say your nerve's all shot. Maybe it is. But, personally, I think you're yellow—you're yellow or you wouldn't have stole my girl away from me!"

Bob Custer gets white, and he wets his lips. His voice is just a whisper.

"Okay, Joe," he says, "okay—I'll fight you now. And enjoy it."

Somethin' wild and mean is dancin' in Joe's eyes. "Get the light gloves," he tells Danny, "and get up to the ring. Hell, this is gonna be *fun*—"

V

THE sun wasn't so bright now. There was a cool little breeze lickin' around the corner of the big red barn as Joe springs through the ropes and does a little shadow-boxin' to loosen up.

Bob walks down to the ring and climbs through the ropes very quiet and waits for Danny to put on the gloves. The high board arena is about half empty; all the newspaper mugs have gone. Terry and me's down there with a couple of seconds on the hot resiny planks. Take it from me, it was the screwiest fight that ever took place in any ring, anywhere!

There was Joe, his slashed face hard and ugly under a three-day stubble of beard. And there was Bob Custer, his lips pale and his eyes wide and solemn as they touched gloves at midring. Danny is prayin' that Bob'll knock Joe out, quick and merciful, I can see that.

"Okay, boys," he says, and steps back.

Right from the start it's Joe who makes the fight, just like you'd expect. He's across the ring in one of his old-time rushes, throwin' leather in a reckless way that has Bob back-pedalin' from the start. The kid's one sweet boxer or Joe would've tagged him in that first wild minute. They tangle in a corner above us and Joe tries to slug it out, toe to toe. Bob slips out and away and as he goes snaps a wicked left to Joe's jaw.

"What's it all about?" asks a voice in my ear. "I thought they just got through sparrin' a minute ago."

I jerk a look over my shoulder and see that the seats are fillin' up again.

"Brother," I tell the guy, "you just keep your eyes open—you got yourself a fifty-dollar ringside seat!"

The guy looks at me like I was nuts. And you can't blame him, because while Danny clocks the seconds between rounds there's just the bright sun overhead, and the wind sighin' in the pines, and a hawk screamin' down in the woods by the pasture. That, and about fifty guys sittin' like they was carved from stone in that sunbaked arena.

Joe's been cut a little by one of Bob's riflin' jabs over the left eye, but otherwise he's unhurt. He's breathin' hard,

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and so far Bob is cool as silk. Only somehow I get the impression that he's scared, not so much of what Joe will do to him as what he might do to Joe. He keeps his eyes on the canvas while Joe watches him across the ring with that curious, goofy leer on his face that you'll see on every stumblebum's face.

"Mix it up, boys," says Danny, and they come out and meet in the middle of the ring in an explosion of hard lefts and rights that show Bob's really tryin' to do his best. Only Joe's tryin' for a knockout, too, and for a minute it's a draw.

Then Joe manages to connect, and he slams Bob Custer into the ropes like he was a rag doll. He's done it with a right hook over the heart. And right then a funny tinglin' chill goes up my spine, because I'm seein' Joe Bryan at his peak—he's really outsluggin' and outboxin' a kid years younger and in a speedier division!

Bob goes into the ropes and Joe's on him like a tiger, pumpin' left and right hooks into the belly. Bob's face shows the pain and a left to the jaw sends him down to the canvas, on one knee.

"Oh, he's hurt!" Terry says beside me. "Spike, you've got to stop it!"

I steady her by the arm. "Bob's all right. He'll snap out of it. It's Joe we're worried about. This is the works!"

Terry's voice has somethin' in it that's both fierce and tender.

"Joe can take care of himself, he likes to fight. But Bob's different. You know what he's like—and—and I love him!"

She probably doesn't even realize what she's sayin', but I get it then.

"So that's the way it is, is it, Terry?"

She tears her eyes away from the ring long enough to look up at me, her eyes wide and coming back into focus. Then she looks back to the ring again. She doesn't have to answer. Probably not even Bob Custer knows the way she feels, the big, dumb kid!

Still kneelin', Bob shakes his head and stays there while Danny slices off the count and Joe dances in a neutral corner, chuffin' his gloves together and grinnin'. It looks like a smile, but I know it's a snarl—I've seen that look too often on Joe's face as he goes in for the kill.

BOB comes up, and Joe comes in. But Joe can't put him away and Bob clinches and rides until his brain has cleared a little. He gets on his bicycle and the round is over.

The third and last starts slower, with each wary. There's a desperate look in Bob Custer's eyes now. He keeps goin' away and Joe finally stops and dares him to come on, and when Bob won't Joe goes after him and finally catches him in a corner.

Just what happens next I never knew, but suddenly Bob let go a straight right punch down the groove that catches Joe on the chin. You can hear the crack clean across the ring, and Joe goes down to the canvas and Bob stands there with a look on his face I'll never forget.

He looks at Joe, tryin' to get up to one knee on the canvas, and then he looks at his right glove—maybe he's rememberin' Garcia, I don't know, but when he's got the chance to go in for the kill he don't do it. Joe comes up still groggy, and hangs on.

"The fool!" I hear my own voice sayin'. "He had him then, he should've nailed him!"

There's that awful laugh on Joe's lips, too, that shows he's thinkin' pretty much the same thing. He hangs on until he's able to clear his brain again. And then he begins to pump short, hard lefts and rights into the kid's belly. Joe's

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at his best at the infightin', and the kid can't get away. The heart's all gone out of him.

Joe's hurt the kid with those wicked short chops to the belly. Now he dances back and Bob's gloves sag just for a second and Joe throws everything he's got into that one punch.

It catches the kid flush on the jaw and lifts him off his feet. It's the Sunday punch all right, because Bob Custer goes down for the count with his knees foldin' like wet cardboard under him. He puts up a glove to his forehead as he goes, like a man who's awful tired and when he hits the canvas he goes limp as if he hadn't a bone in his body—he's out like a light!

All of a sudden a yell goes up from that ringful of fight touts, handlers, and hangers-on. It's a bloodthirsty tribute to Joe Bryan—to a fightin' man who's just made a kill. There's somethin' in it to chill your bones. Terry beside me shivers. Because Joe is grinnin' as they carry Bob Custer out of the ring and toward the barn. Terry looks, and then sobs and hurries away after them. Joe sees her go. And somethin' almost gentle crosses his face.

It's lucky she goes, because Joe stumbles as he's climbin' out of the ring—stumbles over a bucket some careless second has left under the ropes. Joe swears and laughs and kicks it away.

"Hell," he says, "the kid ain't got any business bein' a fighter. In the ring you gotta be tough!"

And he swaggers away across the yard—to keep his appointment with Bat Tighe.

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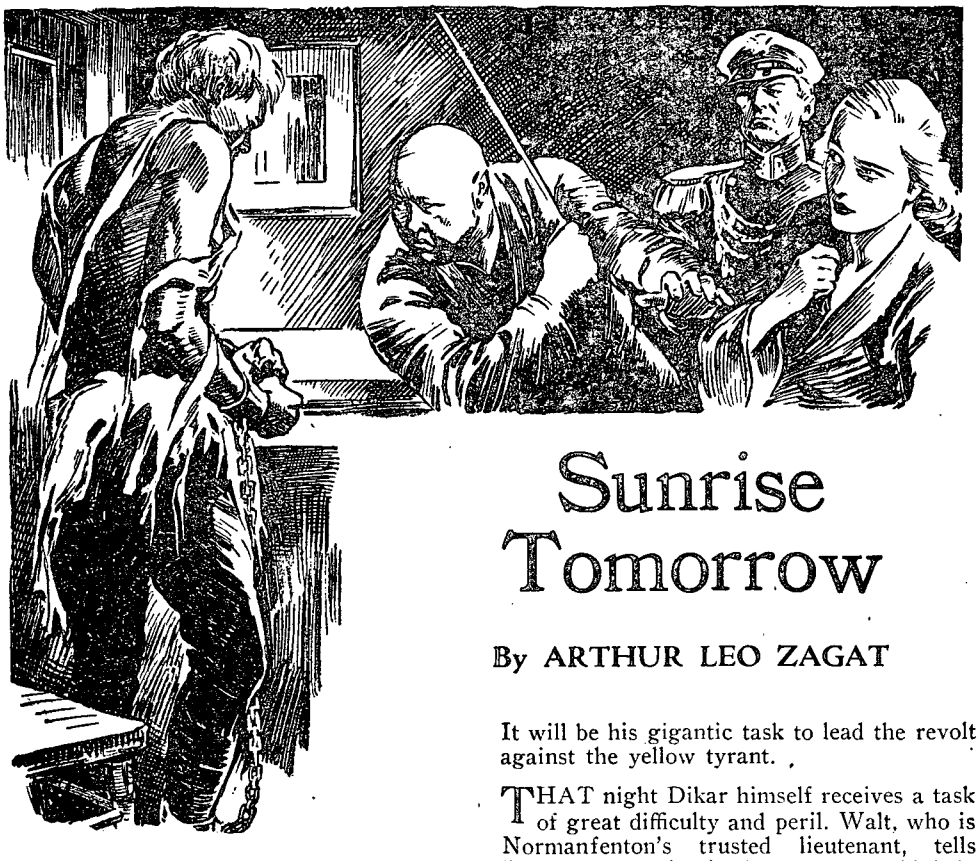

Sunrise Tomorrow

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Go warily, Dikar; you must search the heart of the enemy for the golden key to freedom

WEST POINT has been taken, and there Dikar's Bunch now lives, with the people from the Far Land who have banded together to fight for America's freedom. As yet the Asafrics have not attacked; but the leaders at West Point realize that they must act swiftly or the Americans will be trapped.

Then, on a foraging expedition, Dikar makes a frightening discovery: Someone within the walls of West Point is a spy for the Asafrics. The spy escapes in the woods before Dikar can identify him; but Dikar suspects that he's one of the Beast Folk.

Later at a council meeting Dikar reveals what he has learned, wondering whether the spy is one of those present. At that same meeting it is announced that Normanfenton has been chosen by the Secret Net to act as Provisional President of the New America. It will be his gigantic task to lead the revolt against the yellow tyrant.

THAT night Dikar himself receives a task of great difficulty and peril. Walt, who is Normanfenton's trusted lieutenant, tells Dikar that Benjamin Apgar, a man high in the councils of the invaders, is in reality a loyal patriot. Apgar has given valuable information to the Americans, but lately his contact with the Secret Net has been mysteriously cut off.

So this is the plan. Disguised as an Abyssinian and speaking pidgin English, Dikar is to go down to New York in the company of one Gary, and attempt to reach Benjamin Apgar. Dikar agrees to attempt this dangerous undertaking, and Walt makes him up in his disguise. But when they reach the place where they are to meet Gary, they find there his dead body, his head crushed . . .

CHAPTER V

MAGICAL CITY

DIKAR shoved Walt out of his way, darted past the body in the road, leaped at the bank and clawed up; hands, feet, finding holds

This concludes a two-part serial

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by instinct. The bushes above were loud with the noise of someone running away.

Dikar got to the top, twisted toward the sounds; a red streak jetted across the night and shot-sound banged in Dikar's ears. He threw himself at the black figure the light-flash showed him. His shoulder pounded into a form that went down and he went down on top of it, his knees finding a body, crunching it into the ground, his fingers finding a flailing arm, clutching it.

"Got you," he grunted. "Give up or I'll tear you to little pieces."

The man under him went limp. "Dikar!" It was Paine's voice. "Get off me, Dikar. I've got to see if I've winged him."

"Him?" Gary was right. Paine was a Mudskin. An Asafric spy. "What are you tryin to put over on me?" Gary had tumbled to Paine, had said he was going to watch him, so Paine killed him. "What 'him' are you babblin' about?"

"The one who murdered—God, man! You don't think *I* did that!"

"Didn't you?"

"No, damn you. I—" All of a sudden there was light on Paine, on the dead leaves under him. Walt was standing over them and the light came from the thing he held, and he was looking, sidewise, at something to which he moved the light.

It was a man lying across a bush. His hands were clutched to his breast and they were red with the stain that spread in the gray-blue cloth under them.

Walt's light moved up a little. Eyes, open but sightless, stared out of a knobby, rock-jawed face. "Morgan, eh!" Paine exclaimed. "Buck Morgan! I saw him silhouetted against the sky, clubbing Gary."

Walt bent, picked up something. Dikar shoved himself up off Paine. Walt said, "How did you happen to see that, Paine? How did you happen to be down here to see it?"

Paine held up a hand and Dikar pulled him to his feet. "I didn't have the pass quite ready when Gary came to my quarters to get it, so I told him to go on down and make his final arrangements with you and I'd bring it in a couple minutes.

"I wasn't much longer than that, but I was just too long, because I was only in time to see the murder, outlined against the stars. Morgan must have heard me, because he started to run.

"I slanted to meet him, shot—and then Dikar hit me like a ton of coal. Buck Morgan's the last one I'd have thought to be a renegade."

Dikar recalled how, in the woods, he'd decided that the spy was a Beast Man, on account of the way he covered his trail.

"This is his revolver, then," Walt was saying, holding out what he'd picked up from the ground. Its handle was bloody, hairs stuck to it. "He clubbed Gary with its butt. But I can't understand why. It would have been smarter to let Dikar accomplish his mission if he could, tip off the Asafrics to ambush us on our way to the raid so they could wipe us out."

"He couldn't take a chance on being able to reach them," Paine broke in, "with the outposts on the watch for him after Dikar's warning. Besides—Wait! Here's what he was up to.

"I saw him deliberately shove Gary over the bank. He expected to pick you and Dikar off as you heard the fall and came out of the boathouse. Then he'd grab the motorboat, shoot down to New York, and expose Apgar. That one piece of information would fix him

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well with Hashamoto, and he wouldn't have to risk his neck here any longer."

"Sounds reasonable. . . . There's your gun." Walt pointed past the bush. "Dikar must have hit you like a charging bull to have sent it flying that far."

"I'll say he did." Paine hobbled over, picked it up. "But we're wasting time. Dikar's got to get started soon or it will be daylight before he gets down-river."

"Right!" Walt snapped. "Let's get going." He started leading them back the way he'd come up, around the steeper part of the bank. "With Gary gone, I'll have to go with him, and—"

Paine shook his head. "It's a hundred-to-one bet against Dikar's getting back safely, but that's a dead sure thing compared to the chances of the one who goes with him. Apgar won't dare free a deserter, even if that bluff goes over. Therefore, friend Walt, I'm the one to go."

"No—"

"Walt!" Dikar interrupted, feeling proud he was an American as he heard these two quarrel about who should die for the Cause. "Listen, Walt. You're Normanfenton's best helper. He needs you here. As long as someone has to go with me, it has to be Captain Paine."

"I guess you're right," Walt sighed. Then, looking at Paine, "Do you know the River?"

"I know the River."

THE River was as wide and empty as the sky, and Dikar could tell where River left off and sky began only by the black crouch of the hills between them. Stars sprinkled the sky with tiny lights, sprinkled the River, but there were no lights on the land, nothing to show that anyone lived there or ever had lived there.

The wind carried the smells of the land to Dikar, the green smells of grass and trees, the dark brown smells of earth—a smell of wood burned, of the cold ashes of homes the Asafrics had burned down.

Dikar stared at the blackness that was the land till his eyes ached. The boat purred down the River, very quietly, and the lap of water against the sides of the boat was a quiet sound. In a while Dikar's eyelids closed. He drowsed and woke, and nothing was changed, not sky nor River nor black crouch of the hills, nor the still shape of Paine hunched silent over a little wheel in the front of the boat. Dikar's eyes closed again, and he slept.

And sleeping, Dikar shivered with chill. He stirred and awoke, and he was lying face up to the sky. The sky was no longer black but gray, the stars faded.

He lifted. Paine was no longer a black, still shape in the front of the boat, but a man in blue-gray only a little darker than the sky. The chill that had waked Dikar was the dawn-wind, and the River was paling with the dawn.

"Paine!" Dikar exclaimed. "Captain Paine! I thought you were going to put me on land before it got light!"

Paine's head turned, his face narrow in the dawn-light, his eyes burning. "I fell asleep at the wheel," he said, thin-lipped. "And when I woke up, I saw—" He gestured out over the water.

There were other boats on the water, little ones and boats unbelievably huge. The Asafrics in them looked at Dikar's boat and looked away. "There was nothing left except to brazen it out," Paine said, despair in his voice. "Nothing left except to run down to a pier in the heart of the city and try to get away with our story that I'm a deserter whom you're bringing in."

"I don't see how you could have fallen asleep when your life depended

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on your staying awake," Dikar growled, but even though this was a dreadful thing Paine had done, his thoughts were not on it.

He was gaping at an enormous wall of rock that rose straight up from the edge of the River, gray rock so high that a lonely figure moving atop it seemed no bigger than Dikar's fingernail. The wall was like the Drop that circled the Mountain, but higher, and it went on and on along the River, as far as the eye could see.

"You've got the pass handy, Dikar," Paine said. "Haven't you?"

"Yes." Dikar touched the pocket in his green uniform where he'd put it. In doing this he turned so he saw the other side of the River. His breath caught in his throat.

THERE was some green along that edge of the River, but beyond the green—buildings. Not a few, as at West Point, but so many that they were like a forest of buildings, as many as the trees in the woods. The smallest was as high as the tallest tree in the Mountains.

But they could not be Buildings, piling higher and higher ahead there. They could not be anything men had made. Slender, graceful, they lifted to the sky, white in the pale dawn-light, and blue-gray, and dark-red as the leaves of autumn, and some touched with gold. High they soared till they were misty with height, till they were clouds piling in the sky, tipped with color by the sunrise; till they were like nothing Dikar had ever seen or ever dreamed of, a glory rooted not in the earth but in the heavens.

"What?" Dikar gasped, pointing. "What—?" and could say no more.

"The City," Paine answered. "New York." In that instant the risen sun flooded the City with golden fire, and there was one slim building that rose higher than the rest, an enormous finger pointing at God. The sunlight struck through it and Dikar saw that it was only a broken black tracery against the light.

The boat leaned over, was sweeping around in a long curve, driving straight for the shore. And Dikar saw now that there was scarcely a building whole in all the city, that some leaned crazily and some had great gaps bitten out of their sides. Here and there were spaces where there were no buildings at all.

Then the City was too near, too high, for Dikar to see it. He could only see that they had passed the green strip along the River, that they were shooting straight for a squat, ugly-looking building that stuck out into the greasy waters, a building that would have looked huge to him yesterday but now was small and dirty and mean.

Men were running out to the river-end of this building. Blacks in the green Asafric uniform, and they were carrying the long guns called rifles.

The boat bumped against the end of the building. The Blacks were lined along it, their rifles aiming at Dikar, their little red eyes cruel. An Asafric with only a revolver in his hand leaned over and said something Dikar could not understand.

Paine grabbed a rope that hung down and twisted it around an iron something that stuck up from the side of the boat. The Asafric yelled at Dikar. Dikar made sounds back up at him, a jabber that meant nothing to Dikar himself.

The Asafric looked mad. "W'at kind talk yoh big fella fool make? W'at kind brown-skin Black yoh be, make funny talk Ah no can un'stan?"

Dikar's heart skipped a beat. The Asafric had called him a Black. "Good

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talk w'at ah make." He was getting away with it. "Talk mah people. Ah be Abyssin."

He put a foot up on the edge of the boat, reached to pull himself up to where the Asafric was. "Not so fas'," the latter grunted, jabbing his revolver almost in Dikar's face. "W'at name yoh come heah in boat? W'at name yoh hab dis white fella soldier along ob yoh?"

"W'at name it yoh business?" Dikar decided he might as well be fresh. "Tagloo no tell his business only to off'ser. Yoh bring off'ser, Tagloo tell him."

"All right, Sergeant Skoom! I'll take over." The voice was like a woman's. It belonged to the man with whose high-cheekboned, slant-eyed yellow face looked down at Dikar. "Here you! I am Lieutenant Sing Fong. What's all this?"

DIKAR snapped his hand to his forehead, snapped it down again and stood straight, arms stiff at his sides the way Walt had told him to do when he talked to an officer. "Name ob me Tagloo, sah. Sebent' Foot Reg'ment, Fourt' Comp'ny." His borrowed uniform had on it a badge with those numbers.

"Dis white fella soldier desert f'om Wes' Point. He say he know how we can take fo't easy but he only tell Major Apgar, so my cap'n, Tsi Huan"—that was the name of Jubal's captain and it was signed to the pass Dikar was fumbling out of his pocket—"send me tak' him to de major, nobody else."

The officer took the pass, squinted at it. He made a little sound and kept looking at it. He was doing that for an awful long time. Dikar got all tight inside. The lieutenant's yellow, long-nailed hand strayed to the handle of his revolver. "Come up here. Both of you."

Dikar jumped up to the floor of the building, turned and helped Paine up, stood straight and stiff again, not letting his face show anything. The Black soldiers closed in around them. Sing Fong folded the pass—and stuck it into his own pocket.

"So you're to be taken to Major Apgar." Something, the little smile that played about his naked-looking mouth, the way he purred, maybe, reminded Dikar of a cat he'd seen, at West Point, playing with a bird it had caught and maimed. "No one less."

"Yaas, Lieut'nant." If Dikar jumped into the water— No. Fast as he could swim, the bullets from the Asafrics' rifles would be faster. "Dat be Cap'n Tsi Huan's ordeh."

"Just a minute, Lieutenant," Paine broke in, talking for the first time. "Let me tell you—" *Spat!* Sing Foo's fist lashed into Paine's mouth, so hard that he staggered backward, would have fallen if one of the Asafrics hadn't pounded a rifle butt into his back, straightening him up again.

"It seems to me," the officer remarked, casually, "that you American dogs should have learned by this time to speak to your masters only when you are spoken to. Straighten up. Stand at attention."

Captain Paine's eyes were those of a snake about to strike. "I think you will regret that," came from between his bloody lips, "when I have reported it to your superiors." He has courage, Dikar thought. He has more courage than I have.

Lieutenant Sing Foo's cat-smile deepened. "One more word from you," he murmured, and I will have your tongue torn out. Then he was barking: "Sergeant Skoom! Detail a guard of three privates and take these men to headquarters. You may use my car."

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CHAPTER VI

HIS EXCELLENCY THE SPIDER

THE car was a little truck with high iron sides, painted green. A machine gun stuck out over its back. There were two seats. Paine was in the back one between two Black privates and Dikar was in the front between the other private and Sergeant Skoom, who was doing all the things that made the car start and stop and go the way he wanted it to go.

It went very fast along wide spaces between the buildings. The buildings rose high above, so that it was as if they were at the bottom of deep ravines, very long and very straight with places on each side where people walked.

There were a lot of other cars going between the buildings, little ones like this and big trucks. These had only Asafrics in them but among the people walking there were many whites.

The whites were all stooped over and gray-faced, shambling, the women and children as well as the men. When an Asafric, yellow or black, came swaggering along, the whites made way for him even if they had to go out in the space where the trucks ran to do so. The Asafrics laughed a lot and talked very loudly, but the whites talked very low, if they talked at all, and they never laughed.

Some of the whites had the burned star on their brows and the eyes of these were empty as a dead man's. But that emptiness was better than what was in the eyes of the other whites.

This was fear. Men and women and children, the whites who lived in this city were afraid, and Dikar knew that they had been afraid so long that they had forgotten what it was not to be afraid, because he saw some of the things they feared.

Dikar saw a couple of white men carrying heavy bundles from a truck into a building. One of them stumbled and fell and the Asafric who was watching kicked him, and blood came out of his mouth. Dikar saw a bunch of Americans shuffling wearily along, chained together two by two, and the Asafrics who walked beside them had long whips that lashed out and cut rags and skin from their backs if they went too slowly.

The car passed a big flat space of ground covered by yellowing grass. Instead of trees, poles grew up out of the ground and each pole had a cross-piece sticking out from its top. From each cross-piece hung something that once had been a man but now was a bundle of rags and bones, swinging in the wind.

The smell in Dikar's nostrils was a smell of filth and rottenness, of sick bodies and sick minds; the City that from the River had looked so glorious was a place of desolation and despair.

Dikar tried to close his eyes, so that he would not see these things, but he could not keep them closed. He looked up high, so as not to see the people, and saw a building whose windows were smashed and blind, its insides gutted by fire. He saw another that was nothing but a black network of broken iron, rubble piled in the great hole above which it stood.

All of a sudden there was beside him a wall that went up and up so high that Dikar had to bend his head back as far as it would go to see the top. It was the unbelievable building that had seemed from the River to be a finger pointing at God.

The car slowed and stopped right in front of this great building, and Sergeant Skoom was telling Dikar and Paine to get out.

They obeyed.

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SKOOM walked first, and then Paine and Dikar and behind them the three Asafric privates with their rifles ready to shoot. In this way they went into the building, into a room bigger than any Dikar had ever seen.

It was all stone, with a gold-painted roof and shining black walls, but all the stone was cracked and pieces were broken away everywhere so that the iron bones of the building showed through. And the room stank with the smell of Asafrics.

There were a great many Asafrics standing around, talking and laughing, but the room was so big they hardly seemed to be making any noise at all. An officer, a little man with a sharp, yellow face and shiny hair black as a crow's feathers, came toward them.

Skoom told them to stop and he went ahead to meet the officer, jerking his hand to his head and down again. He talked so low Dikar couldn't hear what he said, and the officer's narrow, slanted black eyes looked past Skoom at Dikar and Paine.

The way the officer looked at them made Dikar feel afraid.

The officer went to the wall and talked into a little box that hung on it. Then he came back to Skoom and said something; Skoom's hand jerked up and down, and he came back to Dikar and Paine, his purplish, thick lips grinning.

"Yoh hab one big fella luck ob de debbil," he said to Dikar. "Yoh go see Viceroy Hashamoto hese'f."

"Hashamoto!" Dikar felt the strength go out of his body. He licked his lips, managed to say, "I no go see Viceroy. Cap'n Tsi Huan say I take white fella deserter to Major Apgar, nobody else."

"Dat all right." Skoom grinned. "You go see major too. He wid Viceroy w'en Lieutenant Sing Foo telefoam 'bout yoh, an dey gib order bring yoh to Viceroy's quahtehs."

"But my white fella pris'ner say he not talk only to major," Dikar persisted. "He say—"

"That's all right, Tagloo," Paine broke in. "I'd rather the Viceroy heard what I have to say. Much rather."

"Come 'long," the sergeant said. "Ah no care w'at you radder or not radder. Come 'long befoh ah make yoh."

They started moving again, and Dikar felt a little better because Paine had said it was all right. Just what Paine was going to do, Dikar couldn't think, but he was very smart and must have worked out something to do.

They went through a door. It closed behind them. The space they were in wasn't much bigger than just enough to hold the six of them and another Asafric who was already in it. All of a sudden Dikar felt very heavy, his feet pressing hard down on the floor.

The hissing sound was sudden and frightening. But the snake noise stopped before he could get the knife out, and the door was opening again.

Sergeant Skoom must have made a mistake, Dikar decided, must have led them into the wrong place and now he was taking them to the right one. They went out again, but this was not the big room. It was a very narrow, long space, its roof white and much lower, doors all along both sides of it. Way down at the end there was a window and Dikar could see the sky through it.

In the short time they had been in the little room, everything outside it had changed.

Dikar's skin was tight and he was shivering. This was a more fearful magic than the electricity. For the first time he wasn't sure the Americans could lick the Asafrics. If they could do things like this . . .

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SERGEANT SKOOM had stopped in front of a wide door at the end of the narrow space and was knocking on it. A muffled voice came through, and Skoom said something in his own language. The sergeant took hold of the handle on the door and pulled it open. The others went through it, and stopped short, and Skoom closed the door behind them.

Sergeant Skoom stood very straight and stiff, jerking his hand to his head, and the privates were frozen figures. There was a kind of greenish color under the Blacks' skin, and their eyes were scared. They were in a room three times as big as Headquarters at West Point. There were a lot of tables and chairs and benches in the room, all of different shapes and bright-colored, and the floor was bright-colored.

The same voice, no longer muffled, said something again. It came from a man who sat at a table far at the other end of the room, a little white man dressed in the green uniform of the Asafrics, his face pinched together like the shell of a nut, his nose hooked like an eagle's beak, his eyes very sharp and bright.

"Major Apgar say yoh two come." Skoom pushed Dikar and Paine, started them walking across the floor.

Another man sat behind the table toward which they walked. He was shorter even than Major Apgar, but he was almost as wide across as he was tall. His yellow face was round, and his eyes were drowned in the flabby bulge of his cheeks. His nose was bashed flat. He had no eyelashes nor eyebrows, and there was no hair on his face, on his great round head or on his soft-looking, swollen body that was covered only by thin, bright red cloth that gaped open down the front.

He was like a spider hiding under a leaf to which one string of its web was fatsened, a spider bloated with the flies it has eaten.

Major Apgar was watching Dikar and Paine come across the floor, but Yee Hashamoto, Asafric Viceroy of America, was looking at the maps that strewed the table. He had a very small red mouth in his great, yellow moon of a face.

Dikar reached the nearer side of the table and stopped short, his hand going up to his head and down as Paine stopped alongside of him. Hashamoto's head lifted and his eyes looked at Dikar, and Dikar knew how a fly must feel, caught in a web and seeing the spider eye him from under the leaf. To escape that feeling he looked past Hashamoto at the wall behind him.

There was a door in that wall and it was a little open. Dikar's nostrils flared. From that door a smell came to him—a strange one to be in this place—the odor of flowers.

Major Apgar was talking to Dikar, his voice as cold as the winter streams on the Mountain.

He was talking in the language of the Asafrics. "Ah no can un'stan w'at de major talk," Dikar said. " 'Cause ah be Abyssin—" He checked at the look on Apgar's face, and knew before the next words came from those thin lips what they would be.

"But it was in the Abyssinian dialect that I spoke," Major Apgar said, and there was a sudden gasp from Hashamoto. "I recognized that you were—You're *not!*" The major was up out of his seat, his pupils widening. "What are you? What—?"

"I'll tell you." This was Paine, and Dikar swung around to him in surprise. "This man is no more an Abyssinian than I am. He is an American spy."

He's given me away, thought Dikar,

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because I can't be saved, but that will save him and give him a chance to talk to Apgar alone.

"An American." A little pink tongue licked Hashamoto's lips and he looked even more like a spider. "Ahhh—and you?"

"An American too, but a loyal subject of your Excellency. No, wait!" Paine's uplifted hand stopped what the Viceroy was about to say next. "Wait and listen. You've been wondering how the Americans' underground operatives have been finding out your most secret plans. I can tell you where they're getting them from, whom they're getting them from. His eyes went to Major Apgar. "It is—"

"No!" Dikar shouted. He sprang, and his hand clamped the betrayal in Paine's throat. "You'll not tell!"

His fingers squeezed; his other arm went across the small of Paine's back. There was a shout somewhere, and a thud of feet running toward him, but Dikar was shoving Paine's purpling face away from him, was bending the upper part of him back over his rigid arm, while the lower part of Paine was clamped against Dikar's straining body.

Shouts somewhere, and a click of rifle bolts, and Apgar yelling. "Don't shoot, you fools. You'll kill the Viceroy." But there was a grating of bone against the swelling muscles of Dikar's arm and a scream shrill and terrible, tore through Dikar's throttling fingers. Paine's back snapped across Dikar's arm, like a dead branch.

Dikar let the body drop and saw green uniforms, black faces, leaping at him, saw clubbed rifles flailing. He roared and sprang to meet them, but a rifle butt pounded into his chest, staggering him back, and another paralyzed his arm. Blows rained on Dikar; he was pounded to the floor.

Dikar rolled on the floor and with darkening sight he saw an iron-covered rifle butt driving down at his head.

CHAPTER VII

TO SAVE A TRAITOR

"NO!" CAME a high, thin cry. "Don't kill him." The rifle butt hung, strangely motionless, over Dikar's head, and in the dizzy dark there seemed to be a flutter of blue above him. A woman's voice cried again, "Don't kill him," and the smell of flowers was very strong in his nostrils. The darkness welled up into Dikar's head and he went down, down into dark depths of pain.

Dikar swung up out of the dark and somewhere above him Hashamoto was saying, "You were right, Lisa. You were very right to stop these fools from killing him. He must know the traitor's name, and he will tell me. Oh, yes."

The darkness faded out of Dikar's eyes. He could see Sergeant Skoom leering down at him, little eyes redder than before, and the other Blacks, rifles clubbed and ready to beat Dikar down if he moved. He could see the gold braid on Benjamin Apgar's green uniform and a gross leg that must be Hashamoto's because it was covered with scarlet cloth.

"Of course I was right." The woman's voice was throaty now. "If I hadn't been coming to see what was keeping you and started to open that door just in time to hear what the other American said, this spy would be dead now and the rebels would keep on learning our secrets."

She hadn't just started to open that door, Dikar thought. It had been open all the time. She'd been listening. His head rolled, and he saw her, a soft blue robe fluttering about her slender, deep-

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breasted white body, her hair a cloud of yellow sunshine about her delicate features. With the movement pain reached deep into Dikar, wrenched a groan from his throat.

"He's coming to," Hashamoto said. "Put irons on him, Sergeant. Quickly."

Skoom knelt, grabbed Dikar's arms. Agony rushed through him, and he went down again into the darkness.

When he could see again he was slumped in a chair, iron cuffs on his wrists, on his ankles. Skoom was standing stiff in front of Hashamoto and the Viceroy was talking. "You will say nothing of this to anyone, nor will your men. Understand?"

"Yaas, Excellency. Ah understand."

"You had better." Very cruel was that round, yellow face. "If the traitor is warned and escapes, I shall know just whom to blame and that will be unpleasant for you. You may retire now to the corridor outside this room and wait there for further orders."

Skoom saluted, turned sharply away and marched out of the room, the other Blacks following. The three, Hashamoto and Apgar and Lisa, watched them go, none speaking until the door closed behind them.

"Now," Hashamoto murmured. "Now we shall ask our friend a question or two." He came toward Dikar and a humming sound came with him. The humming sound was caused by something in his pudgy hand. It was a very thin stick as long as Dikar's arm, and it shone in the light like the blade of a knife and quivered because it was so thin. The quivering was what made the humming sound.

Benjamin Apgar watched the scarlet-clothed, bloated form as it padded softly toward Dikar, and Apgar's wrinkled face was expressionless except for the eyes; they had the look of someone who was drowning and did not know how to save himself. And in Lisa's violet eyes there was, strangely, that very same look.

Yee Hashamoto stopped, three paces from Dikar's chair. "Stand up," he commanded, low-toned. "Get up on your feet."

DIKAR'S jaw set in a stubborn line. Then his face relaxed. He had thought of something: These iron cuffs on his wrists could crack a skull. He heaved, every muscle a separate agony, twisted, and was up out of the chair—

The thin stick whined, flashed down in front of Dikar. He dodged back, almost fell, managed to keep his feet. The stick hadn't touched him.

The jacket of his uniform hung loose. The buttons from it were rolling across the floor.

Wheen! Dikar didn't even see the stick move that time, but he felt chill on his back. Green cloth fell down between his legs. *Wheen! Wheen!* Two slashes! He was naked above his waist except for the sleeves on his arms and two rags that hung from his shoulders. The thin stick had stripped him, but had never touched his skin.

"I have not lost my skill with this," Yee Hashamoto murmured, stroking it between the fingers of his free hand. "A sweet toy." Its humming was the noise a wasp made flying in the summer sun. "I can slice an inch of flesh from your body." Spittle was bubbling at the corners of his tiny, red mouth. "And another inch and another, stripping your skeleton clean while you live inside of it. I can deal the Death of the Thousand Cuts, which takes so very long to kill."

The floor heaved up and down beneath Dikar. If only the yellow spider would come nearer. No use to spring at

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him. That gray-white stick would meet one, would slash across one's eyes.

"But there will be no need for me to prove my skill," Hashamoto murmured. "I am quite sure that you are going to tell me the name of the traitor on my staff."

Dikar looked at him. Queer. The room was spinning.

"Are you not?" The stick rose, humming. "Answer me."

"No." Was this hoarse croak his voice? "No, I am not," Dikar croaked and sprang at the Viceroy, his manacled arms lifting. But he thudded to the floor, tripped by the irons on his ankles. He thrust fists against the floor, and was too weak to lift himself.

Fire burned across his back—the lash of the humming stick. A foot thudded into Dikar's side, turned him over, and he was staring up at an expressionless moon-face.

The thin stick hummed, hanging above Dikar, and there was a red smear on its shine and it dripped red drops.

"Who is he?" Yee Hashamoto murmured, his face expressionless. "What is his name?"

All the pain in Dikar's body seemed to drain into that one place where the stick had touched him. If Apgar tried to stop this he would only give himself away, and he must not do that. He had helped the Cause, he would help it again.

"You can kill me, but I won't tell you."

"I shall kill you, but not before you tell me." The stick hummed, lifting.

"Yee." It was Lisa's blue robe Dikar saw above him now, and Lisa was saying, "It's going to take a long time to make him speak, Yee." Her slender, white hand was on Yee Hashamoto's fat arm. "And once more you won't have time to take me flying. Turn him over to Ben Apgar."

The yellow man brushed Lisa's hand from his arm. "This man knows the traitor's name; I want that name. You understand, Lisa? This is no time for pleasure flying."

"You promised me, Yee. You gave me your word that nothing would keep you from doing it today."

"Then I break my promise."

"Again!" There was sharpness in Lisa's voice, sudden violent fire in her eyes. "This is the fifth time. Remember what *I* promised *you* yesterday when the report of trouble in the South and West came in and you said you couldn't go."

He was looking at her strangely. "What?"

"THAT if we didn't go today, I was through. Go ahead with what you want to do." She was walking away, her blue robe whispering about her slenderness, "Take as much time as you want."

She reached the door through which she had come in, faced around, one hand on the door handle, the other at her throat. "Take all day, all week to do what Ben Apgar could do as well as you. Better perhaps." The skin at her throat was as white as the down on a pigeon's breast and looked as soft, as warm to the touch. "But don't come looking for me when you're done, because I won't be here."

"Lisa." Hashamoto's creased neck swelled with his anger. "You talk like that to me? You dare? There is still a whipping post, Lisa. I can still send you back to it. I can still have you flogged to the death from which I saved you."

"Of course you can." She smiled thinly. "And the whole army will laugh at you." But Dikar saw the flutter in her throat that told how terrified she was. "The whole army will laugh, whis-

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pering how even a white slave-woman preferred death on the whipping post to the attentions of the Viceroy.

"No, my dear. Whether you have me publicly flogged to death or privately murdered, the secret will leak out, and if you let me live, I will tell it. All your officers will be greatly entertained. When you give them an order they will salute, and turn from you and snicker, thinking of how a helpless woman despised you. Where will your discipline be then? Where will be your face?"

There was a choking sound in Hashamoto's throat.

"And when, on the other side of the world," Lisa went on, mercilessly, "your Emperor hears the echo of your army's laughter— One minute, my dear Yee. I give you one minute to come to me," Lisa said, and was gone.

After the door closed, there was only the hum of Hashamoto's thin stick and sound of his heavy breathing. Then Benjamin Apgar began to speak, low-voiced.

"The little devil. But she'll do it, Excellency. Nothing in God's world can keep her from doing it."

"Nothing—" Yee Hashamoto, Viceroy of all America, was a fumbling fat man. He spread his hands wide, said, "It was once said: 'It is safer to put your honor in keeping of man who hates you than in hands of woman who love—' Can I trust you, Benjamin Apgar?"

"In all the years, your Excellency, that I have served you, have you ever found reason to distrust me?"

"No." Hashamoto held out his stick, and queerly, it did not hum. "When I return, Major Apgar, I shall expect to hear the name of the traitor."

"You may expect it," Apgar answered, taking the stick, and Hashamoto was going across the room and out of the door.

"Poor Lisa," Apgar sighed. "She did not have the courage to die to save her own soul, but when it was her country—"

Trying to get up, Dikar saw the crumpled, shapeless thing that he had made of Captain Paine, and suddenly a lot of things were clear to him. Paine was the spy, not Morgan. Paine, not Morgan had slipped up behind Gary, clubbed him. It was Morgan who'd seen that murder, and Paine had shot Morgan.

The revolvers—if they had stopped to think about how they lay, the bloody, hair-matted one near Paine, the other so much farther away.

The plan to kill Walt and Dikar, to steal the boat and come down the River to tell the Asafrics about Apgar—no wonder Paine had figured it out so quickly. He hadn't had to figure it out; it had been his own plan. He hadn't fallen asleep over the wheel at all. If Lieutenant Sing Fong had let him talk . . .

"But Lisa only postponed the inevitable," Apgar was saying. Dikar looked at him. "She will have to let Hashamoto come back some time, and then—"

The major's thin hand, like a bird's talons, held a revolver and it was pointing down at Dikar. "I'm sorry, son." The nutlike face had a queer smile on it. "But this is the most Lisa has gained for us—a bullet in your brain, another in mine."

CHAPTER VIII

NO TYRANT RULES THE SKY

ODDLY, Dikar was not afraid. "Wait," he said. "Listen. To make sure that he does not make me tell your

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secret, you must shoot me, of course; but you must not shoot yourself. You're needed, Major Apgar. America needs you now more than it ever did."

"Needs me?" The revolver wavered, ever so little. "No, son. I can do no more for America, now that I am no longer in touch with the Secret Net. I can do no more, and I have lived in hell too long, and I'm tired." It was almost as if he were pleading with Dikar for the right to die. "I have earned my rest."

"There can be no rest for anyone till America is free again." Dikar rocked up to squat on his haunches and the room started to circle again, the floor to heave, but at length the blur cleared. "I came here to tell you what you can do. What you must do. That is why I came looking for you."

"For me—yes. Yes, of course. I'd forgotten." Apgar pulled across his brow the edge of the hand that held the gun. "The lieutenant did report that you insisted on seeing me, and Hashamoto thought that so strange he had you brought up here. You have a message for me?"

"I have. From the President of the United States."

"The President!" Apgar looked startled. "He's escaped! But even if he has, what good? I saw him only last week, a dirt-crusted, bedraggled thing climbing the bars of his cage and eternally singing the *Star-Spangled Banner* in a shrill, cracked voice."

"The man you saw was the president of a dead America. The man who sent me to you is the Leader of a new America, an America that is only just now being born. Listen, Major Apgar."

In a voice hoarse with pain Dikar told about Normanfenton and the Second Continental Congress, and a light began to come into Benjamin Apgar's face, and he was a tired old man no longer. Then Dikar told of the plan the Congress had made and Apgar turned quickly to the table, snatched up one of the maps Hashamoto had been studying.

"Here's the very place," he cried, smacking his hand on it. "The munitions depot at Dover, New Jersey, only eighty miles from West Point. You say you have captured plenty of trucks when you took the fort? With those we can make it there and back in one night.

"There's a well-paved highway between that isn't too well guarded, and Dover's garrisoned by only two companies. Blow up the explosives stored there and Hashamoto will be so enraged that he will forget all about his careful plans. Look here."

Apgar gathered the other maps in both hands. "The Viceroy has decided merely to keep watch on West Point while he dispatches bombing planes and troops to put down the insurrections in— But what's the use?" The excitement was abruptly out of him. "We can't get word to Fenton about all this. There's no way."

"There is," Dikar broke in. "There must be. Think, Apgar. Till the Viceroy gets back you're still a major on his staff. You still can give orders that will be obeyed by every Asafric. There must be some way."

"Wait! Maybe— Lie down there. Lie down and groan, and pretend to be just on the point of fainting." Apgar was stuffing the maps into an inside pocket of his coat as Dikar obeyed. "And pray that this will work. It will be a miracle if it does, but miracles sometimes happen."

Then he was calling in a loud voice, "Skoom! Sergeant Skoom!"

The wide door at the other end of the room opened. "Heah, sah."

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"Bring your men in here," Apgar snapped. "On the double-quick, and make sure that door's locked behind you."

THEY came in, their feet thudding on the floor, their rifles jangling. "Line them up at attention," Apgar snapped. Skoom barked orders and the three privates were standing in a straight line across the floor before the major, with Skoom a step or two in front of them.

Dikar moaned, scrabbling the floor with his fingers. This was not all pretense of suffering, for every movement brought him agony.

Above him, Major Apgar was talking to the Blacks in their own language. Dikar could not understand, of course, but he learned afterward that this was what Apgar was saying: "You heard enough, before you were sent out of here, to know that someone has been betraying us to the American dogs, and that this carrion whimpering at my feet knows who the traitor is.

"He has been persuaded to tell us the name, but the man is so highly placed that the lightning of the Viceroy's wrath cannot strike him like a bolt from the skies. The Emperor's permission must be obtained before so much as a hand may be laid upon him.

"General Yee Hashamoto has gone to arrange for this, but meantime there is danger that the traitor may learn that he is discovered, and flee. It is needful, therefore, that this pig of a spy be hidden from knowledge of all till the Viceroy is ready to act swiftly. This is the task Yee Hashamoto has laid upon me, and upon you.

"The words you hear now come from my mouth but the voice is the voice of your Viceroy. The orders you hear are to be obeyed no matter who gives you contrary orders, unless it be the Viceroy himself, by my mouth or by his own. Is that understood?"

"It is understood, sah," Skoom answered. "We understand and obey."

"Very well. We are flying the prisoner to a camp in the northern woods where we will guard him till the traitor is safely in jail. Skoom! Unlock those irons from the prisoner's feet but leave those on his wrist.

"You, on the end there! You are of a size with him. Remove your tunic and clothe him in it. You will lock the outer door when we depart and remain here, opening to no one until the Viceroy relieves you. You other two will come with us and you will shoot down anyone, officer or enlisted man, who attempts to speak with the prisoner, or to hinder us."

CURIOUS eyes followed them as they walked out through the enormous stone-walled room. But the Asafrics quickly saluted when they saw the forbidding frown on Major Apgar's face; they did not attempt to speak to the Blacks or to their iron-cuffed prisoner.

Outside, Dikar was ordered into the back seat of the car between the two privates. Apgar sat in front with Skoom.

The car started off. Apgar leaned over and spoke to Skoom. Skoom grinned and touched something on the wheel he gripped. Dikar jumped as a siren started to howl and looked up into the sky for planes; then he realized that the howling came from the front of the car, and that the car was going faster.

The other cars and trucks were scattering from in front of them, like minnows when a trout darts at them from beneath a shadowy rock; and they were going so fast that there were tears in Dikar's eyes and he could see only a

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gray blur of buildings speeding past.

Then, suddenly, there were no building, but blue sky and a wide, white road and a white lattice of iron rising into the sky, with water far beneath. A few moments later the car was running across an enormous flat field, and it was slowing, the siren moaning to silence.

Across that field, as far as Dikar could see, stretched lines and lines of planes, huge planes shining silvery in the sunlight and medium-sized ones red as the breast of a tanager and little ones black as crows. And buzzing like bees about the planes were hundreds of Asafrics.

The car rocked to a stop near a line of the small black planes. Major Apgar sprang to the ground. A yellow-faced officer came running and stiffened to attention.

"I want one of your fastest pursuit planes," the major snapped. "One that is ready to take-off at once."

Slant eyes glanced at Dikar, shifted back to Apgar. "The major has a flight order from the field-commandant, of course."

"I have not. But I have a verbal order from the Viceroy, and I'm in a hurry."

"But Major Apgar"—the officer looked puzzled—"the Viceroy—"

"Are you questioning an officer of the Viceroy's personal staff? Do you dare?"

The lieutenant paled. "No, sir. By no means, sir."

"Then give me a plane and be quick about it."

"Yes, sir." The officer wheeled about, pointed to one, at the end of the nearest line. "That is my own and I know she is one of our fastest." A number of Asafrics were swarming over it. "We are just finishing the morning checkup on her, and—"

"Get those men out of her and turn her over to me. Quickly."

"Yes, sir." The officer started away. Major Apgar turned to the car, said, "All right, Skoom, get them out of there." Skoom jabbered to the privates and they grabbed Dikar's arms, hauled him out to the ground. Then they were all hurrying toward the little black plane.

A WHISTLE shrilled somewhere, loud, ear-piercing. All over the field Asafrics were stopping what they were doing, were looking upward. Dikar's little group reached the plane where the last Asafric was tightening something on a wing, and the lieutenant was saying to Major Apgar, "I must tell you that we've just received warning that a line squall is coming down from the north. All but absolutely necessary flights have been called off."

"Damn the squall," Apgar growled. He glanced up into the sky and Dikar saw a tiny muscle twitch at the corner of his cheekbone. "I'm not calling this one off." Dikar looked up too and saw a plane, bright green as leaf-buds in the spring, coming down on a long, swift slant. "Here. Give me your goggles."

"Yes, sir." The officer handed something to the major. "But I shall need them, flying you—"

"You're not flying us. There will be no room for you. Skoom!" Apgar whirled to the sergeant. "Get everyone into the plane. Snap to it."

Skoom was jabbering to the privates He was pointing to the green plane which had landed now and was running along the ground, straight toward them. "Skoom!" The major snapped. "Do you hear me? Get the prisoner into the plane."

The sergeant said something, started toward him. The green plane had

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stopped, about a hundred yards away. The Asafric workmen were carrying a set of short steps to it, placing the steps against it, just under a door in its side. The door was opening.

Apgar's voice was sharp, angry, behind Dikar—the sergeant's answer sullen-sounding. The privates' fingers were tightening on Dikar's arms. The door of the green plane opened, and a figure in glittering uniform stepped into the sunlight—a bloated figure with a round, moon face. Yee Hashamoto!

The sudden roar of an engine drowned out the voices behind Dikar. The Viceroy glanced that way.

Dikar saw Hashamoto's tiny mouth open, saw his fat arm lift to point at them. The Asafrics were turning, were starting to run toward Dikar and the black plane. Hashamoto jumped down off the steps and came on, yelling.

"He's seen us," Dikar cried. "He knows who we are." The Major was in the black plane, and Dikar shouted at him: "Get away. Leave me and get away."

Skoom had hold of Dikar's arm with one hand and was pulling a revolver from his belt with the other. But Dikar's sudden leap tore him from the Black's grasp. He lifted his arms, clamped together by the cuffs, brought them down. The manacles struck Skoom's head savagely. The sergeant was falling and Dikar was leaping over his fallen body, and Apgar was dragging Dikar over the side of the plane.

The plane was moving, but shots were barking all around, and Dikar could hear Hashamoto's bellow above the engine's roar. Dikar dragged himself upright and saw the soldiers closing in on the plane, the little guns in their hands spitting fire. Right ahead Dikar saw the green plane; a flutter of blue appeared in its open door, and a delicate face framed by hair like yellow sunshine.

But the black plane was sluggish to rise. It drove forward, only a few feet above the ground, and there directly in its path was the green plane, terrifyingly near. Then Dikar saw the ground drop suddenly away and in that same instant a rending crash threw him violently to one side. Another shock and he was being whirled somewhere between the earth and the sky.

IT SEEMED an endless time before Dikar was no longer being wrenched about, but at last he was carried steadily, and the shot-sounds, the shouting, seemed far away under him. He dragged himself up, somehow, till he could look over the plane side. He saw sky, looked down and saw the field skimming away. The little men down here were running about like ants.

"The miracle!" he heard Benjamin Apgar yell. "The miracle has happened. Our landing gear's torn away but we're still in the air, and we've got a chance now to get away."

Wind whipped Dikar's face, but still he stared down at the field. He could see a heap of broken green and a spot of blue near it that was very still.

"She did as best she could what she was best fitted for," Dikar whispered to himself, "an at Evenin Council the Boss of us all will say to her, 'Well done, Lisa.'" Then he felt a quick impact of terror that left him weak.

He'd realized suddenly that he was in the air, high in the air, and that there was nothing to hold him there, nothing but this shivering, frail thing they called a plane.

Dikar's legs buckled under him and he fell to the plane's floor, groveling. He'd been scared before but never like this. Never like this.

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"The storm warning must have turned Hashamoto back." Apgar's voice came to him, from far away, it seemed. "And he landed just at the wrong time for us, but we got away in spite of—Oh! Maybe we haven't got away yet. Look!"

The sky was filled with sound, with a rumble of thunder. Dikar's face, his palms, his whole body, were wet with cold sweat, but this seemed to have somewhat purged him of his terror. He had strength again to lift his head and look back the way Apgar had pointed.

Far back, far below, the field had shrunk so small that Dikar's hand might almost cover it, but black specks were streaking up from it, rising swiftly into the fathomless blue of the sky, and Dikar knew that these were the planes of the Asafrics pursuing them.

"Can they catch us?" Dikar demanded, turning to the weazened little man who crouched in the front of the plane, his hands clutching a stick stuck up from its floor. "Can you get us away from them?"

"I don't know," the answer came through the roaring in the sky. "But I'm going to make a damned good try."

CHAPTER IX

THUNDER IS A FRIEND

FAR ahead gray-black clouds piled up in the sky, the clouds of the storm that had turned Yee Hashamoto back, but about them the sky was clear as the water of a Mountain stream, as crisply cold.

Beneath, fold on fold, the hills that had crouched blackly ominous in the night were patterned with squares of green, darker and lighter, and yellow. Fine white lines that were broad roads meandered among them and from the bottom of a long crease in the hills glinted silvery-blue a ribbon no wider than Dikar's arm. The great River.

"Can you fight with a machine gun, Dikar?"

"I never have," Dikar answered Major Benjamin Apgar's question, looking at the red marks where the iron cuffs had ribbed the skin from his wrists. The cuffs were gone because, luckily, Apgar had taken from Skoom the key to them before they left headquarters. "But I can try, if I have to."

"Well, you're going to have to, all right. Look back."

Dikar obeyed. The black specks hung in the blue, far back, just as they had hung since they'd started out. No! One was a little larger, a little nearer the others. It was growing, very slowly, but still growing so that already Dikar could make out its spread wings, the blurred circle at its head that gave it strength to fly.

"This is one of their fastest pursuits," Apgar said grimly. "But that one is faster. It's going to catch us long before we reach West Point."

"What do we do then?" Dikar asked, quietly.

"We fight. See that machine gun behind you? Sit down on the floor beside it. There is a little tube, just at the level of your head. Close one eye and look through with the other."

Obeying, Dikar gasped. The leading Asafric plane had jumped forward miles, was almost on top of them. He jerked his head away. No. It was still back there, only a little nearer than it had been before.

"That's the sight," Apgar was saying. "You see those crossed hair lines? Where they join, the bullets will hit on your mark. The handle under the near end of the gun will move it."

He went on, telling Dikar how to aim the machine gun, how to load it, how

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to fire it, and by the time he had finished the pursuing plane was as near, almost, as it had seemed when Dikar first looked through the sight.

Bluish lines streaked the sky; there was a loud *rrrrt, rrrrrt.* There was a bright spot on the wing beside Dikar. Others! The Asafric plane was roaring at him. The *rrrttt* was behind Dikar, nearer.

He turned. It was coming from the machine gun in front of Apgar, and beyond, between their own plane and the up-slanting hills, was the Asafric plane. Black-goggled men crouched in it. The hills and the plane swung up, over, down again in front of Dikar. He caught the Asafric plane on the cross-hairs of his sight, pressed the trigger; he heard and felt the machine gun's harsh sound, and then the plane and the hills were gone. . . .

SUDDENLY the Asafric plane was whirling away, spinning crazily and dropping, flames bursting from it, and the plane he was in was tossing frantically no longer. Apgar was calling back, "All right, Dikar? Are you all right?"

"Yes," Dikar gasped, not quite sure, for there was fire across his one shoulder and there was sticky wetness on his forehead when he lifted his hand to it. "I think so." Turning, he saw that one arm of Apgar's hung limp by his side, its sleeve darkening. "But you're hurt!"

"No," Apgar said. "Not bad." The light within his face was even brighter; his eyes were shining. "I've not forgotten," he cried. "It's been years but I haven't forgotten how to handle a plane in a dog-fight."

"A dog-fight? I didn't see any dogs."

Apgar laughed and for an instant Dikar thought he heard one of the Boys of the Bunch laugh, so young and joyous was the sound. But then Dikar saw that the sky was all black-gray, close ahead, saw lightning streak the high-piled clouds.

"The storm!" he cried. "We're flyin' right into it!" And the sky was filled with thunder, but the thunder was from behind. Dikar wheeled, saw that the planes of the Asafrics, those that were left, were much nearer and coming fast. "The planes, Apgar! The other planes. We're going slower, and they're catching us!"

"The fight held us up and crippled us," Apgar's answer was blown back to Dikar on the wind. "The storm waits ahead, Dikar, and the death lies behind. But be damned to them both, for between them, see is West Point."

Dikar looked down and saw the gray buildings of West Point nested very small in the encircling hills. A great shout of joy rose in his throat.

A white cloud puffed, just below the plane, and another little white cloud; the plane rocked and straightened, and rocked again, and sharp thunder struck at Dikar.

"They're shooting at us." Apgar pounded the stick with his good fist. "In West Point they're shooting at us with their Archies. We can't get down in the face of their fire."

Thunder rolled in the storm ahead, and thunder rolled from the planes coming behind, and sharp thunder struck at Dikar from the little white puffs beneath.

"They think we're leading a squadron of Asafrics to attack them, Dikar. They think we're the enemy. After all we've gone through, to be killed at last by our friends— We have no way to let them know who we are."

"Yes we have," Dikar cried. He was tearing off his green uniform, coat, trousers. "We have one way." He was

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naked as when he roamed the Mountain. "Circle, Apgar! Circle above that flag down there."

"What—what are you going to do, Dikar?"

"I know they have tubes there by the Archies, through which they can see far and far. I'm going to let them see me, and they'll know who I am because I'm naked."

"But they can't see you, here in the cockpit, from below!"

"They'll see me where I'm going," Dikar flung back, and he was climbing up out of the place Apgar called the cockpit. He was climbing out on the wing torn by bullets, and the wind took hold of him.

THE wind, stronger than any storm wind Dikar had ever known, fought to tear him from the wing. Thunder rolled from the storm clouds, from the black planes, from the Archies below; and the thunder tossed the plane, shaking it, trying to shake Dikar from its wing, to cast him down and down till he smashed on the Plain below, between the gray buildings of West Point.

But Dikar clung to wires with both hands and would not let the wind tear him from the wing, would not let the Archies shake him from it. Dikar leaned far out, and below him the flag whipped in the storm wind, red and white and blue. Dikar let go with one hand, his feet clinging to the very edge of the plane, and leaned far out and waved his free hand to the little men on the roofs from which the Archies barked their thunder.

And suddenly the plane was not tossing any longer in the thunder of the Archies, and a faint sound of cheering came up to Dikar from below. The white puffs of the Archies were bursting far behind now, were bursting about the black, pursuing planes. The pursuing planes were lifting above the reach of the Archies, but Dikar's plane was sliding down the breast of the wind to the Plain that was hemmed in by the gray buildings of West Point.

Somehow Dikar tumbled back into the cockpit. Thunder clapped, deafening, but it was only the thunder of the storm. "Great stuff, son," he heard Apgar exclaim, and then Apgar groaned. "We have no landing gear."

"No landin—" Dikar gasped. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I've got to take her in on her belly. Miracle! We'll need a dozen miracles to live through this. Hold tight!"

There was only sound, vast sound blotting out all else. And then silence, darkness—light in the darkness, little yellow tongues of fire, licking toward Dikar.

Dikar could not move, could not get away from the fire. Something was holding him.

Thunder! A clap of thunder that burst the sky. Then a hissing like a thousand snakes—the hissing sound of rain. The air solid with rain that beat down on Dikar, that beat down and drowned the flames.

Wet hands were dragging Dikar out of the wreck of the plane. Dimly he saw faces in the rain—Walt's, Normanfenton's. He saw vague figures gathered about a limp form, carrying it. The rain-curtain parted. The form was Benjamin Apgar's, and his eyes were open, and he was smiling. He was not dead. Benjamin Apgar was alive, and the plans, the maps, were safe.

"Dikar!" Marilee's voice was crying his name. "Oh, Dikar." Marilee was sobbing his name. Marilee's arms were around him, her lips were on his, and his head was on Marilee's breast.

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It was sweet to sleep with his head pillowed on Marilee's soft breast.

•

Dikar awoke. He was on his bed in the little House that was his and Marilee's, and night pressed black against the window. Out of the night came a thunder.

"The trucks, Dikar." Marilee was here by his bedside, gray eyes grave on his, smiling at him. "They're starting out for the raid on Dover."

"Starting!" Dikar pushed at the bed to get up, "I've got to—"

His hands were strangely clumsy; they were great white bundles, wrapped in cloth. The white stuff wound his body. Marilee's small hand pushed Dikar down on the bed. She was so strong suddenly—or was he so weak?

"You're not going anywhere, my dear," Marilee murmured. "You're staying here with me. You've done your job for today."

"For today. But tomorrow—"

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. There will be many tomorrows for us, Dikar, and each tomorrow will have its task for which you are fitted, and each task you will do well, because you are Dikar.

"But best of all there will be a new Tomorrow for America, a grand and shining Tomorrow for a free America, the long night of slavery ended, the sunrise come at last."

"Please, God," Dikar whispered. "Let there be sunrise, Tomorrow."

THE END

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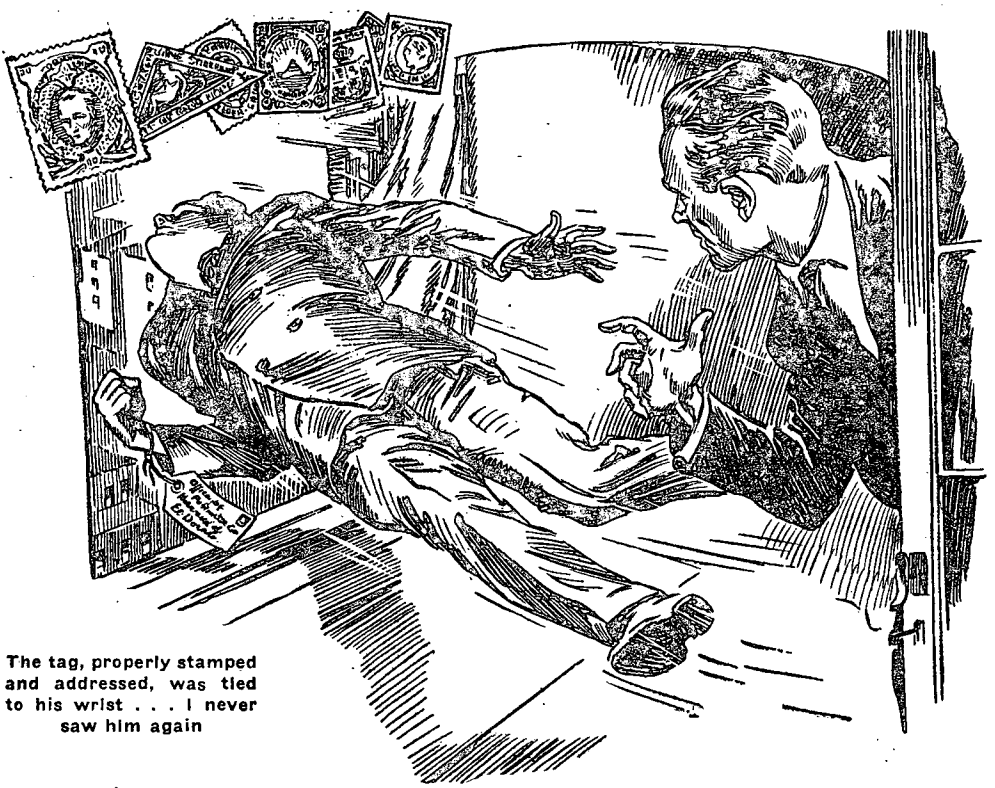

The tag, properly stamped and addressed, was tied to his wrist . . . I never saw him again

Introducing Murchison Morks, the improbable and intolerable, whose collection of stamps could whisk you painlessly out of space and time. With a discussion of procedure which any postmaster general might study with profit

By ROBERT ARTHUR

Author of "The Flying Eyes," "If You But Wish," etc.

"NOW these triangulars," Malcolm said pridefully, pointing to a glass frame behind which were five stamps in faded shades of red, blue, green, yellow and black, "make up probably the rarest and most interesting complete set known to philatelists. Their value is not definitely established, since they've never been sold as a unit. But—"

It was at this point that Morks interrupted. I had known he would. Malcolm had gotten further in his narration than was usual, with Morks around. But Morks—his full, and quite improbable name is Murchison Morks—had been bending forward to peer at the stamps, and it took him a moment to straighten and turn.

"They are certainly rare," Morks said in that modest, melancholy way of his which is as impossible to stop as the flow from a broken bathroom tap, "but I once had a set of stamps

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that were even rarer, and more interesting."

Malcolm's face took on a dark tinge of displeasure. Morks did not appear to notice it. If my morning paper ever tells of the finding of a body of an unidentified man of about forty, hair sandy, face long and sad but with an indefinable touch of inner dignity, whose death resulted from a violent beating with a dull instrument in the hands of an individual apparently gripped by ungovernable rage, I shall know that Morks has met his destined fate.

For, no matter what you may have done or seen, or where you may have been, it is not safe to speak of your experiences where Morks can hear you. Whatever you have seen, Morks has seen something stranger; whatever you have done, he has done something more thrilling; wherever you have been, he has been there before you, and under circumstances of considerably more danger.

And whatever you may own, he has owned something rarer.

The fate reserved for a man like Morks is brutal in the extreme. For years their fellows put up with them, permit interruptions by them, listen to them, and grit their teeth. But at last some one's self-control is bound to snap under the strain of having Morks put his most exciting experience aside as unworthy of the telling.

And when that day comes—when Morks in mild astonishment finds himself being beaten to a pulp which can no longer move or speak to interrupt a fellow man's narration—all who knew him will shake their heads but admit the deed quite justified.

I am surprised that I myself have not been the instrument of judgment upon Morks before this. Heaven knows that I have suffered. . .

But I started to recount the tale Morks told in response to the jog Malcolm's remark had given his memory—or his imagination.

That is the insidious thing about Morks. No matter how he may exasperate you, you listen. And when he has finished, though you may disbelieve his story utterly you cannot possibly prove it is not true.

And sometimes days later you find yourself muttering aloud, uttering objections you could not think of at the time that might have broken Morks down into admitting he was lying. Without, yourself, even yet being entirely *positive*. . .

But there I go again. I must restrain myself, for I at least have devised a way of getting even.

I take Morks' stories down, and when they are not too fantastic, sell them. In this way I recoup the sums Morks sponges from me in the form of cash, meals, and drinks—especially drinks. (The lodging I give him from time to time, on the couch in my study, I do not assess against him. That costs me nothing.)

So, as to the stamps:

"YOU own a set *rarer* than my triangulars?" Malcolm asked; and the dark blood was creeping higher into his cheeks.

But Morks was quite oblivious to Malcolm's raised tones, which had attracted the notice of all the other members in the room.

Malcolm's valuable stamp collection was on exhibit there as a feature of a forthcoming visitors' day at our club—the one day of the year when the club's portals open to the members' women relatives and their friends.

"Not own, no." Morks shook his head in gentle correction. "Owned."

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"Oh!" Malcolm snorted. "I suppose they got burned? Or stolen? Or lost?"

"No"—and Morks uttered a sigh—"I used them. For postage, I mean. Before I realized their utter uniqueness."

Malcolm gnawed at his lip.

"This set of stamps," he said with great positiveness, laying a possessive hand on the glass covering the triangular bits of paper, "cost the life of at least one man."

If he hoped to silence Morks by that, he was disappointed.

"Mine," Morks replied instantly, his voice soft—as it always became, strangely, once he had attracted everyone's attention—"cost me my best friend."

"Cost you the *life* of your best friend?" Malcolm demanded, through tight-clenched teeth.

Morks shook his head, his face expressing a reflective sadness, as if in his mind he were living again a bit of the past that it still hurt him to remember.

"I don't know," he answered the philatelist. "I really don't. I suspect not. I honestly think that Harry Norris—that was my friend—at this moment is a dozen times happier than any man here. And when I reflect that but for a bit of timidity of my part I might be with him—"

He broke off, seeing that all present had gathered within listening distance.

"But I had better tell you the whole story," he said more briskly, "so you can fully understand."

Smiling, as if pleased, Morks let himself drop into an easy chair, where he composed himself in comfort.

I AM not a stamp collector myself (he began, with the pleasant nod toward Malcolm) but my father was. He died some years ago, and among other things he left me his collection.

It was not a particularly good one—he had leaned more toward picturesqueness in his items than toward rarity or value—and when I sold it, I hardly got enough for it to repay me for the trouble I went to in having it appraised.

I even thought for a time of keeping it; for some of his collection, particularly those stamps from tropical countries that featured exotic birds and beasts, were highly decorative.

But in the end I sold them all—except one set of five which the dealer refused to take, because he said they were forgeries.

Forgeries! If he had only guessed—

But naturally I took his word for it. I assumed he knew. Especially since the five stamps differed considerably from any I had ever seen before, and had not even been pasted into my father's album. Instead, they had been loose in an envelope tucked in at the rear of the book.

The dealer's view that they were forgeries gained added credence from the fact that I could find no space in the album where they might have been placed. There was not even a section devoted to their country—though this was not conclusive, since the album was small and by no means included all the less-well-known states.

But forgeries or not, they were both interesting and attractive. The five were in differing denominations: ten cents, fifty cents, one dollar, three dollars, and five dollars.

All were unused, in mint condition—that's the term, isn't it, Malcolm?—and in the gayest of colors: vermillion and ultramarine, emerald and yellow, orange and azure, chocolate and ivory, black and gold.

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And since they were all large—their size was roughly four times that of the current air mail stamps, with which you are all familiar—the scenes they showed had a vividness and reality lacking even in the most colorful of my father's other items.

In particular the three-dollar one, portraying the native girl with the platter of fruit on her head—

However, that's getting ahead of my story. Let me say simply that, thinking they were forgeries, I put them away in my desk and forget about them for several years.

I found them again one night, quite by accident, when I was rummaging around in the back of a drawer, looking for an envelope in which to post a letter I had just written to my best friend, Harry Norris. Harry was at that time living in Boston; and as I found it impossible to leave New York, we kept up a frequent correspondence.

It so happened that the only envelope I could find was the one in which I had been keeping those stamps of my father's. I emptied them out, addressed the envelope, and then, after I had sealed the letter inside, found my attention attracted to those five strange stamps.

Their gaudy colors pleased the eye, and the pictures that graced them snared the imagination. Especially the three-dollar one . . .

But I mentioned that. As it was several years since I had put them away and forgotton them, many details concerning them had slipped my mind. Now I studied them more closely.

I have mentioned that they were all large and rectangular: almost the size of baggage labels, rather than of conventional postage stamps. But then, of course, these were not conventional postage stamps. Not in any sense of the word.

Across the top of them was a line in bold print; CONFEDERATED STATES OF EL DORADO. Then, on either side, about the center, the denomination. And at the bottom, another line, *Rapid post.*

Being unfamiliar with such things, I had assumed when first I found them that El Dorado was one of these small Indian states, or perhaps it was in Central America some place. Rapid Post, I judged, would probably correspond to our own air mail.

Since the denominations were in cents and dollars, I rather leaned to the Latin America theory: there are a lot of little countries down there that I'm always getting confused, like San Salvador and Columbia. But until that moment I had never really given the matter much thought.

NOW, staring at them, I began to wonder whether that dealer had known his business. They were done so well, the engraving executed with such superb verve, the colors so bold and attractive, that it hardly seemed likely any forger could have gotten them up. They looked like the real article to me.

It is true the subjects they depicted were far from usual. The ten-cent value, for instance, pictured a unicorn standing erect, head up, spiral horn pointing skyward, mane flowing, the very breathing image of life.

It was almost impossible to look at it without *knowing* that the artist had worked with a real unicorn for a model. Except, of course, that there aren't any unicorns any more.

The fifty-center showed Neptune, trident held aloft, riding a pair of har-

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nessed dolphins through a foaming surf. It was just as real as the first. The old boy even had a twinkle in his eye; and looking close, you could make out that he was winking at a mermaid way off in the corner.

The one-dollar value depicted Pan playing on his pipes, with a Greek temple in the background, and three fauns dancing on the grass. Looking at it, I could almost hear the music he was making.

I'm not exaggerating in the least. I must admit I was a little puzzled that a tropical country should be putting Pan on one of its stamps, for I thought he was purely a Greek monopoly. But when I moved on to the three-dollar stamp, I forgot all about him.

I probably can't put into words quite the impression that stamp made upon me—and upon Harry Norris, later. You'd have to be a man—of course, you all are—but I mean, you'd have to be a man and see it as we saw it to know just what I mean.

The central figure was a girl; I believe I spoke of that.

A native girl, against a background of tropical flowers. A girl of about sixteen, I should say, just blossomed into womanhood, smiling a little secret smile that managed to combine the utter innocence of girlhood with all the inherited wisdom of a woman.

Or am I making myself clear? Not very? Well, no matter. Let it go at that. I'll only add that on her head, native fashion, she was carrying a great flat platter piled high with fruit of every kind you can imagine; and that platter, together with some flowers growing about her feet, was her only attire.

I looked at her for quite a long time, before I examined the last of the set—the five-dollar value.

This one was relatively uninteresting, by comparison—just a map. It showed several small islands set down in an expanse of water labeled, in neat letters, *Sea of El Dorado*. I assumed that the islands represented the Federated States of El Dorado itself, and that the little dot on the largest, marked by the word Nirvana, was the capital of the country.

I quite forgot, for some minutes, about my letter to Harry Norris. I found myself thinking that, next time I took a boat trip I really must arrange a stopover in El Dorado, when my eye encountered the envelope and I recalled my original purpose.

Then an idea occurred to me. Harry had a nephew who collected stamps. Just for the fun of it, I might put one of those El Dorado forgeries—if they were forgeries—on my letter to Harry, along with the regular stamp, and see whether it wouldn't go through the post office. If it did, Harry's nephew might get a rarity, a foreign stamp with an American cancelation, that might some day bob up to confound an expert.

It was a silly idea, but it was late at night and finding the stamps had put me in a gay mood. I promptly licked the ten-cent El Dorado, pasted it onto the corner of Harry's letter, and then got up to hunt a regulation stamp to put with it.

The search took me into my bedroom, where I found the necessary postage in the wallet I had left in my coat. While I was gone, I left the letter itself lying in plain sight on my desk.

And when I got back into the library, the letter was gone.

I don't need to say I was puzzled. There wasn't any place it could have gone to. There wasn't anybody who could have taken it. The window was

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open, but it was a penthouse window overlooking twenty floors of empty space, and nobody had come in through it.

Nor was there any breeze that might have blown the envelope to the floor. I looked. In fact, I looked everywhere, growing steadily more puzzled.

And then, as I was about to give up in complete bafflement, my phone began ringing.

It was Harry Norris, calling me from Boston. His voice, as he said hello, was a little strained. I quickly found out why.

Three minutes before, as he was getting ready for bed, the letter I had just finished giving up for lost had come swooping in his window, hung for a moment in midair as he stared at it, and then fluttered to the floor at his feet.

THE next afternoon, Harry Norris arrived in New York. I had promised him over the phone, after explaining about the El Dorado stamp on the letter, not to touch the others except to put them safely away until we could examine them together.

It was obvious that the stamp was responsible for what had happened. In some manner it had carried that letter from my library straight to Harry Norris' feet in an estimated time of three minutes, or at an average rate of approximately five thousand miles an hour.

It was a thought to stagger the imagination. Certainly it staggered mine.

Harry arrived just at lunch time, and over lunch I told him all I knew; just what I've told you now. He was disappointed at the meagreness of my information. But I couldn't add a thing to the facts we already knew, and those facts spoke for themselves.

Basically, they reduced to this: I had put the El Dorado stamp on Harry's letter, and promptly that letter had delivered itself to him with no intermediary processes whatever.

"No, that's not quite right!" Harry burst out. "Look. I brought the letter with me. And—"

He held it out to me, and I saw I had been wrong. There *had* been an intermediary process of some kind, for the stamp was canceled. Yes, and the envelope was postmarked, too, in a clearly legible, pale purple ink.

Confederated States of El Dorado, the postmark said. It was circular, like our own; and in the center of the circle, where the time of cancelation usually is, was just the word *Thursday.*

"Today is Thursday," Harry remarked. "It was after midnight when you put the stamp on the letter?"

"Just after," I told him. "Seems queer these El Dorado people pay no attention to the hour and the minute, doesn't it?"

"Only proves they're a tropical country," Harry suggested. "Time means little or nothing in the tropics, you know. But what I was getting at, the Thursday postmark goes to show El Dorado is probably down in Central America, as you suggested. If it were in India, or the Orient, it would have been marked Wednesday, wouldn't it? On account of the time difference?"

"Or would it have been Friday?" I asked, rather doubtfully, not knowing much about those things. "In any case we can find out easily enough. We've just to look in the Atlas. I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

Harry brightened.

"Of course," he said. "Where do you keep yours?"

But it turned out I hadn't any Atlas

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in the house—not even a small one. So we phoned downtown to one of the big bookstores to send up their latest and largest Atlas. And while we waited for it we examined the letter again and speculated upon the method by which it had been transmitted.

"Rapid post!" Harry explained. "I should say so! It beats air mail all hollow. Why, if that letter not only traveled from here to Boston between the time you missed it and fell at my feet, but actually went all the way to Central America, was canceled and postmarked, and *then* went on to Boston, its average speed must have been—"

We did a little rough calculation and hit upon two thousand miles a minute as a probable speed. When we'd done that, we looked at each other.

"Good Lord!" Harry gasped. "The Federated States of El Dorado may be a tropical country, but they've really hit upon something new in this thing! I wonder why we haven't heard about it before?"

"May be keeping it a secret," I suggested. "No, that won't do, because I've had the stamps for several years, and of course, my father had them before that."

"I tell you, there's something queer here," Harry suggested, darkly. "Where are those others you told me about? I think we ought to make a few tests with them while we're waiting for that Atlas."

With that I brought out the four remaining unused stamps, and handed them to him. Now Harry, among other things, was a rather good artist; and his whistle at the workmanship was appreciative. He examined each with care, but it was—I'd thought it would be—the three-dollar value that really caught his eye. The one with the native girl on it, you remember.

"Lord!" Harry said aloud. "What a beauty!"

I didn't know whether he meant the stamp or the girl, but I had my suspicions. After all, that had been my own reaction; and Harry was younger than I. Also, I could add, a good bit handsomer.

Presently, however, Harry put that one aside and finished examining the others. Then he turned to me.

"THE thing I can't get over," he commented, "is the *lifelikeness* of the figures. You know what I'd suspect if I didn't know better? I'd suspect these stamps were never engraved at all. I'd believe that the plates they came from were prepared by one of the new electric processes from photographs."

"From photographs!" I exclaimed; and Harry nodded.

"Of course, you know and I know they can't have been," he added. "Unicorns and Neptunes and Pans aren't running around to be photographed, these days. But that's the feeling they give me."

I confessed that I had had the same feeling. But since we both agreed on the impossibility of its being so, we dismissed that phase of the matter and went back again to the problem of the method used in transporting the letter.

"You say you were out of the room when it vanished," Harry remarked. "That means you didn't see it go. You don't actually know what happened when you put that stamp on and turned your back, do you?"

I agreed that was so, and Harry sat in thoughtful silence for some moments, tapping his fingernails against his white, even teeth.

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At last he looked up.

"*I* think," he said, "we ought to find out by using one of these other stamps to mail something with."

Why that hadn't occured to me before I can't imagine. As soon as Harry said it, I recognized the rightness of the idea. The only thing was to decide what to send, and to whom.

That held us up for several minutes. There wasn't anybody else either of us cared to know about this just now; and we couldn't send anything to each other very well, being both there together.

"I'll tell you!" Harry exclaimed at last. "We'll send something to El Dorado itself!"

The thought excited him.

I agreed to that readily enough, but how it came about that we decided to send, not a letter, but Thomas à Becket, my aged and ailing Siamese cat, I can't remember.

All I know is that Harry suggested it, and it seemed logical enough at the time. Perhaps already there was beginning to stir in his mind an idea—But as I say, I don't know. However it may have come about, Thomas à Becket we decided to send.

I do know that I told myself it would be a kind way to dispose of the creature. Transmission through space at the terrific velocity of one hundred and twenty thousand miles an hour would surely put him out of his sufferings, quickly and painlessly. I would be saved the pangs of doing it myself, or having it done; and he, if he had any thoughts about it at all, could solace himself by the reflection that he had served a useful scientific end.

As to what the post office in El Dorado would think, finding itself the possessor of a defunct Siamese tomcat, I didn't speculate.

THOMAS À BECKET was asleep under the couch, breathing asthmatically and with difficulty. I found a cardboard box the right size and we punched some air holes in it. Then I gathered up Thomas and placed him in the container. He opened rheumy old eyes, gazed at me vaguely, and relapsed into slumber again. With a pang I put the lid on and we tied the box with heavy twine.

"Now," Harry said thoughtfully, "there's the question of how to address him, of course. However, any address will do for our purpose."

He took up a pen and wrote with rapidity. *Mr. Henry Smith, 711 Elysian Fields Avenue, Nirvana, Confederated States of El Dorado.* And beneath that he added, *Perishable!, Handle With Care!*

"But—" I began. Harry cut me off.

"No," he said, "of course I don't know of any such address. I just made it up. But the post office people won't know that, will they?"

"But what will happen when—" I began again, and again he had had the answer before I'd finished the question.

"It'll go to the dead letter office, I expect," he told me. "And if he *is* dead, they'll dispose of him. If he's alive, I've no doubt they'll take good care of him. From the stamps I've gotten a notion living is easy and cheerful there, and the climate may do him good. His ancestors lived in a tropical country, you know."

That silenced my questions, and Harry picked up a stamp—the fifty-cent value—licked it, and placed it firmly on the box. Then he withdrew his hand and stepped back beside me.

Intently, we watched the parcel.

For, a moment, nothing whatever happened.

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And then, just as disappointment was gathering on Harry Norris' countenance, the box holding Thomas à Becket rose slowly into the air, turned like a compass needle, and began to drift with increasing speed toward the open window.

By the time it reached the window, it was moving with race-horse velocity. It shot through and into the open. We rushed to the window and saw it moving upward in a westerly direction, above the Manhattan skyline.

And then, as we stared, it began to be vague in outline, misty; and an instant later had vanished entirely. Because of its speed, I suggested, the same way a rifle bullet is invisible.

But Harry had another idea. He shook his head as we stepped back toward the center of the room.

There was a gleam of wild amazement in his eyes.

"No," he began, "I don't think that's the answer. I have a notion—"

What his notion was I never did find out. Because just then he stopped speaking, with his mouth still open, and I saw him stiffen. He was looking past me, and I turned to see what had affected him so. And I suspect that I stiffened too.

Outside the window was the package we had just seen vanish. It hung there for a moment, then moved slowly into the room, gave a little swoop, and settled lightly onto the table from which, not two minutes before, it had left.

Harry and I rushed over to it, and our eyes must have bugged out a bit.

Because the package was all properly canceled and postmarked, just as the letter had been. With the addition that across the corner, in large purple letters, somebody had stamped, *Return to Sender. No Such Person at this Address.*

"WELL!" Harry said at last. It wasn't exactly adequate, but it was all either of us could think of. Then, inside the box, Thomas à Becket let out a squawl.

I cut the cords and lifted the lid. Thomas à Becket leaped out with an animation he had not shown in years. He dropped to the floor and began to stalk back and forth, making a little spitting noise as if in indignation.

There was no denying it. Instead of killing him, his trip to El Dorado, brief as it was, had done him good. He looked five years younger.

Harry Norris was turning the box over in his hands, his expression perplexed.

"What I can't get over," he remarked, "is that there really *is* such and address as 711 Elysian Fields Avenue. I swear I just made it up on the spur of the moment."

"There's more to it than that," I reminded him. "The very fact that the package came back. We didn't put any return address on it."

"So we didn't," Harry agreed. "Yet they knew just where to return it to, didn't they? You know, these El Dorado people have a very remarkable postal system. There are some features of it Washington might copy with profit."

He pondered for a moment longer. Then he put the box down.

"I'm beginning to think," he said an odd expression on his face, "that there is more to this than we realize. A great deal more. I suspect the whole truth is a lot more exciting than we have any notion. As for this Federated States of El Dorado, I have a theory—"

But he didn't tell me what his theory was. Instead, that three-dollar chocolate-and-ivory stamp caught his eye

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again, and he broke off to pick it up.

"Jove!" he whispered, more to himself than to me—he was given occasionally to these archaic ejaculations—"she's beautiful. Heavenly! With a model like that an artist might paint—"

"He might forget to paint, too," I put in. Harry nodded.

"He might indeed," he agreed. "Though I think he'd be inspired in the end to work he'd never on earth have dreamed of doing, otherwise." His gaze at the stamp was almost hungry. "This girl," he declared, "is the one I've been waiting all my life to find. To meet her I'd give— I'd give— Well, almost anything."

"I'm afraid you'd have to go to El Dorado to do that," I suggested flippantly, and Harry started.

"So I would! And I'm perfectly willing to do it, too. Listen! These stamps suggest this El Dorado place must be rather fascinating. What do you say we both pay it a visit? We neither of us have any ties to keep us, and—"

"Go there just so you can meet the girl who was the model for that stamp?" I demanded.

"Why not? Can you think of a better reason?" he asked me. "I can give you more. For one thing, the climate. Look how much better the cat is. His little excursion took years off his age. Must be a highly healthful place. Maybe it'll make a young man of you again. And besides—"

But he didn't have to go on. I was already convinced. As he said, those stamps conveyed the impression that the Federated States of El Dorado must be a place of surpassing interest.

And as for Harry's wanting in particular to find the girl on the stamp, I couldn't blame him. If I'd been his age, I'd have wanted to myself.

"All right," I agreed. "We'll take the first boat. But when we get there, how will we—"

"By logic," Harry shot back. "Purely by logic. The girl must have posed for an artist, mustn't she? And the postmaster general of El Dorado must know who the artist is, mustn't he? We'll go straight to the postmaster general. He'll direct us to the artist. The artist will give us her name and address. Could anything be simpler?"

I hadn't realized how easy it would be. Now some of his impatience was getting into my own blood.

"Maybe we won't have to take a boat," I suggested. "Maybe there's a plane service. That would save—"

"Boat!" Harry Norris snorted, stalking back and forth across the room and waving his hands. "Plane! You can take boats and planes if you want to. I've got a better idea. I'm going to El Dorado by mail!"

UNTIL I saw how beautifully simple his idea was, I was a bit stunned. But he quickly pointed out that Thomas à Becket had made the trip, and come back, without injury. If a cat could do it, a man could.

There wasn't a thing in the way except the choice of a destination. It would be rather wasted effort to go, only to be sent back ignominiously for want of proper addressing.

"I have that figured out too," Harry told me promptly when I voiced the matter. "The first person I'd go to see anyway when I got there would be the postmaster general. *He* must exist, certainly. And mail addressed to him would be the easiest of all to deliver. So why not kill two birds with one stone by posting myself to his office?"

That answered all my objections. It was as sound and sensible a plan as I'd ever heard.

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"Why," Harry Norris added with rising excitement, "I may be having dinner with the girl tonight! Wine and pomegranates beneath a gold-washed moon, with Pan piping in the shadows and nymphs dancing on the velvet green!"

Then he grinned, a little sheepish at having let his imagination run away so.

"At any rate," he said, "having dinner with her."

"But"— I felt I had to prepare him for possible disappointment—"suppose she's married by now?"

He shook his head.

"She won't be. I have a feeling. Just a feeling. Now to settle the details. We've got three stamps left—nine dollars' worth altogether. That should be enough. I'm a bit lighter; you've been taking on weight lately, I see. Four dollars should carry me—the one and the three. That leaves the five-dollar for you.

"As for the address, we'll write that on tags and tie them to our wrists. You have tags, haven't you? Yes, here's a couple in this drawer. Now give me that pen and ink. Something like this ought to do very well . . ."

He wrote, then held the tags out to me. They were just alike. *Office of the Postmaster General,* they said. *Nirvana, Federated States of El Dorado. Perishable. Handle With Care.*

"Now," he said, "we'll each tie one to our wrist . . ."

BUT I drew back. Somehow I couldn't quite nerve myself to it. Delightful as the prospects he had painted of the place, the idea of posting myself into the unknown, the way I had sent off Thomas à Becket, did something queer to me.

I told him I would join him. I would take the first boat, or plane, and meet him there, say at the principal hotel. But bring myself to go my mail I couldn't.

Harry was disappointed, but he was too impatient by now to argue.

"Well," he agreed, "all right. But if for any reason you can't get a boat or plane, you'll use that last stamp to join me?"

I promised faithfully that I would. With that he held out his right wrist and I tied a tag about it. Then he took up the one-dollar stamp, moistened it, and applied it to the tag. He had the three-dollar one in his hand when the doorbell rang.

"In a minute," he was saying, "or maybe in less, I shall probably be in the fairest land man's combined imagination has ever been able to picture. And then—"

"Wait!" I called, and hurried out to answer the bell. I don't know whether he heard me or not. He was just lifting that second stamp to his tongue to moisten it when I turned away, and that was the last I ever saw of him.

When I came back, with the package in my hands—the ring had been the messenger from the bookshop, with the atlas we had ordered—Harry Norris was gone.

Thomas à Becket was sitting up and staring toward the window. The curtains were still fluttering. I hurried over. But Norris was not in sight.

Well, I thought, he must have put on that stamp he had in his hand, not knowing I'd left the room. I could see him, in my mind's eye, that very moment being deposited on his feet in the office of an astonished postmaster general.

Then it occurred to me I might as well find out just where the Federated States of El Dorado were, after all.

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So I ripped the paper off the large volume the bookstore had sent and began to leaf through it.

When I had finished, I sat in silence for awhile. From time to time I glanced at that unused tag, and that uncanceled stamp still lying on my desk. Then I made my decision.

I got up and fetched Harry's bag. It was summer, luckily, and he had brought mostly light clothing. To it I added anything of mine I thought he might be able to use, including a carton of cigarettes, and pen and ink on the chance he might want to write me.

As an afterthought I added a small Bible—just in case.

Then I strapped the bag shut and affixed the tag to it. I wrote *Harry Norris* above the address, pasted that last El Dorado stamp to it, and waited.

In a moment the bag rose in the air, floated to the window, out, and began to speed away.

It would reach there, I figured, before Harry had had time to leave the postmaster general's office, and I hoped he might send me a postcard or something by way of acknowledgement. But he didn't. Perhaps he couldn't.

. . . At this point Morks stopped, as if he had finished his story. But unnoticed Malcolm had left our little group for a moment. Now he came pushing back into it with a large Atlas-Gazeteer in his hands.

"So that's what became of your set of rarities!" he said, with a scarcely veiled sneer. "Very interesting and entertaining. But there's one point I want to clear up. The stamps were issued by the Federated States of El Dorado, you say. Well, I've just been looking through this atlas, and there's no such place on earth."

Morks looked at him, his melancholy countenance calm.

"I know it," he said. "That's why, after glancing through my own atlas that day, I didn't keep my promise to Harry Norris and use that last stamp to join him. I'm sorry now. When I think of how Harry must be enjoying himself there—

"But it's no good regretting what I did or didn't do. I couldn't help it. The truth is that my nerve failed me, just for a moment then, when I discovered there *was* no such place as the Federated States of El Dorado—on earth, I mean."

And sadly he shook his head.

"I've often wished I knew where my father got those stamps," he murmured, almost to himself; then fell into a meditative silence.

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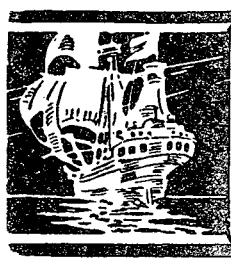

Argonotes

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE ARE often told that ours is a meager, dusty life, firmly enclosed by office walls. A good many of our authors have ridden the perilous trails; they have gone six rounds with Kid McCoy, or they have felt the hot breath of savages on their necks; and so they are inclined to be scornful of our thin and colorless days.

Well, they are right, of course. We never could ride a Shetland pony very well, and since our .22 got rusty, we have been content with the second-hand gunsmoke that seeped from the pages of a manuscript. But this morning we were thinking over the vacation we hope soon to take, and it struck us suddenly that here was our moment for high adventure. Two weeks of freedom—go out and Live, we told ourself; walk with danger and count not the cost. Be a man, like in ARGOSY. We got quite excited over the idea and drank two glasses of milk at lunch, as a kind of toast.

But now it is afternoon, and we are wondering. After all, it's quite a job to hunt up adventure, and we probably wouldn't have time enough. There's our aunt in New England we have promised to visit, and our wife thinks we ought to get as much rest as possible. Maybe next year . . .

Here is the pleasant conclusion to the now celebrated Hastings Correspondence.

WILLIAM HASTINGS

Please accept by belated thanks for services rendered me in my quest for information in regard to the serial "Swordsmen of Mars". Also let me tell you I'm sorry for any inconvenience my request has caused you in the deluge of letters descending on your office.

Had I had the slightest conception of what the results of my letter would be, I would not have written it. Please extend my apologies to your secretary and tell her not to think too harshly of me for having been the cause of her over-wrought nerves.

I wonder how many of your readers have read some of Edgar Rice Burroughs' book novels. Here are some of them: "The War Lords of Mars", "The Chessmen of Mars", "Thuvia, Maid of Mars", "Tannar", "Tannar of Pelucidar", "Tarzan at the Earth's Core".

In closing let me say once more *muchas gracias* for your fine help in my request. Well, it's time to say *hasta la vista* until the next issue.

CINCINNATI, OHIO

The letter below is from an admirer of Charles Marquis Warren, and any admirer of Warren's is a friend of ours.

JOHN REAMS

I don't blame you for your pride in having brought C. M. Warren along the way you have. He has done a beautiful job in "Bugles Are for Soldiers". Too good in some spots, where he starts scalping people, for they make me glad the Indian country is safer nowadays.

I wonder if he ever lived out this way. He seems to understand the philosophy of an Indian mind, whereas most writers seem to have read too many dime thrillers when they were young. Writers sometimes forget that the Indian has as much integrity, by his own standards, as any other race of people.

My only regret is that Mr. Warren had to identify the cowardly character of his story with either the Confederate or the Union Army. They were both composed of courageous fighting men, and I believe all thinking Americans regret the conditions which caused the war.

I liked "Bowmen's Banner" by Roy de S. Horn. He has a nice style.

TUCSON, ARIZONA

OUR next correspondent, having a high regard for Theodore Roscoe, wants to know whether Mr. Roscoe is going to collect his American presidents stories in a book. Well, we can't give a definite answer

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to that; there is a possibility that he will, and we heartily approve of the idea.

MRS. BURT JONES

Of all the writers you have featured in your magazine Theodore Roscoe is the greatest. These stories of our presidents are incomparable. Do you know if Mr. Roscoe is going to publish this series in book form? If he hasn't had such an idea, will you prevail on him to do so? Will wait with anxiety to see your answer in Argonotes. Kindly give a short sketch of Mr. Roscoe's life.

NEW YORK CITY

WE wish we could give you a sketch of T.R.'s life. But he's quiet, modest, retiring. Remembering "Mother Damnation," we think he was raised somewhere along the Erie Canal; but even that's guesswork. He doesn't talk much about himself.

LOOKING AHEAD!

THE HARP AND THE BLADE

Great Charlemagne was dead, his empire fallen; and all Europe lay in ruins. Only a bard who was an Irishman could sing so bravely in the face of chaos; only a poet with the strong blood of heroes in him could wield a blade so valiantly against the Dane or Frank who tried to still the voice of high adventure. Beginning the novel that is Argosy's discovery for 1940. By

JOHN MYERS MYERS

CINDERELLA AND THE MOB

The whole trouble was, they weren't any of them gentlemen. Except the one who bought me the ice cream soda and took me home, after all the shooting started. It was all very confusing because they promised me curtains and I don't need any curtains. Anyway, I guess I won't answer the phone any more when the family's out. The story of my big night is in what they call a complete novelet, written by

CORNELL WOOLRICH

MOVE OVER, NEPTUNE

Warning: The Bilge and Binnacle Club has been called to disorder. All ships are advised to proceed with caution: The Club is afloat somewhere on the Pacific—to the peril of anyone who happens to be cursed with sanity. A hilarious novelet with plenty of room and bathysphere, by

CRAWFORD SULLIVAN

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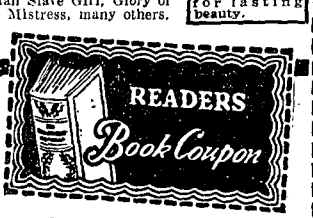

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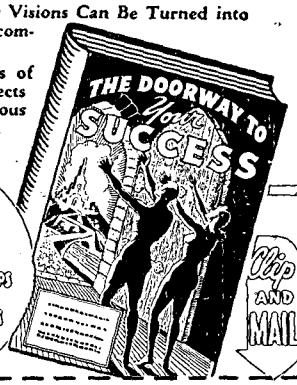

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